

Among the Fur

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Among The Fur Traders

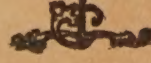
by
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"Andy's War," etc.

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Among The Fur Traders

FOREWORD

C.I

NINETY years ago this account of how the New Fur-Trading Company came into existence, was written by Louis Wills, the only nephew of old John Wills of the X. Y. Company. Imprisoned by the winter in one of his stockaded forts on the Missouri River he set about the task as a pleasant way in which to spend the hours until the waterways were free from ice in the spring.

The story is not printed exactly as he wrote it; some of his language has been changed a little, and his many pages of statistics of the fur business have been omitted. Several chapters devoted to the early ventures in trading for pelts would have been inserted save for the fact that the entertaining information occupied far too much space.

To Louis Wills' granddaughter am I indebted for the time-worn manuscript which was found by Colin McKenzie among the papers left in Bob's Fort when the commandant set out for the Pacific coast, from which journey he never returned.

I have found great pleasure in working over the lad's story, and if he who reads the result is as well entertained, then am I doubly repaid for the labor.

JAMES OTIS.

Contents

CHAP.		PAGE
I	"A NOR'WESTER"	9
II	STRANGERS	30
III	ST. LOUIS	54
IV	A DECLARATION OF WAR	77
V	CAPTIVES	101
VI	CHOUTEAU'S POST	125
VII	A DUEL	149
VIII	TROUBLE WITH THE INDIANS	171
IX	A BUFFALO HUNT	190
X	PRISONERS	207
XI	BARGAINING FOR LIBERTY	221
XII	THE WAR-DANCE	236
XIII	MASTER STEWART	250
XIV	WINTER QUARTERS	265
XV	BESIEGED	282
XVI	A RUNNING FIGHT	296
XVII	A REAL BATTLE	311
XVIII	SNOWED IN	329
XIX	THE MANDAN VILLAGE	347
XX	THE NEW COMPANY	370

AMONG THE FUR TRADERS

CHAPTER I

"A NOR'WESTER"

YES, I, Louis Wills, not yet turned sixteen years of age, called myself a Nor'wester, and with good reason ; my uncle was John Wills, an old X. Y. trader, who afterward joined the Northwest Fur Company, than which there is none better in America in this year of grace, 1810.

We said of ourselves, and I counted myself a member of the company because of being employed by it, that we could "live hard, lie hard, sleep hard, and eat dog," all of which we did by choice or through compulsion, many a time during every twelve months.

I had come down from Fort William to Mackinaw during this summer, with a boat's crew who were bent on ruffling the feathers of the boasters employed by the Mackinaw

Company—Southwesters, some called them, although the company which traded under this last name had not then been formed.

It goes without saying that I wore a Northwest button, and called myself “a man from the north” when in the presence of these pork-eaters, who believed they must have soft bread and bacon at least once every week; but I held myself somewhat aloof from our voyageurs,¹ because of having been intrusted with important business for the company—such business as might, if I conducted it properly, bring me to the position of agent, if indeed I was not made a partner.

We made our headquarters under the hill, on the shore, for I was not minded to partake of a man’s bread while trying to deceive him, and I had really come to this post as a spy in the interest of the Nor’westers.

On a certain day in July I saw Colin McKenzie, a lad who had been twice at Fort William in company with his Uncle Donald, stepping out from a canoe within thirty paces of my quarters.

I saw nothing strange in the fact that Colin

¹ Canadian boatmen.

should have come from Montreal just at that time, for both he and his uncle were in the employ of the Mackinaw Company; but the private reason for his being there astonished me greatly, because his business was very much the same as mine, and both of us had been instructed to carry ourselves as if we were enjoying the summer rest after a long winter of hard work.

It was not until we were drinking tea in my quarters, knowing full well there were no eavesdroppers near at hand, that Colin explained, under injunctions of secrecy, why he had come.

It appeared from his story that the Earl of Selkirk professed the intention of making a settlement somewhere near the Red River, in that district lying between Fort William and Fort Mandan, and was trying to get possession of an hundred thousand square miles of country for the purpose of planting a colony.

If the nobleman simply wanted to bring settlers into America the fur companies would have made no objections, for then there might have been just so many more trappers to sell

pelts; but that which made Lord Selkirk's scheme look suspicious, according to the reports brought by Colin, was the fact that he was trying to trade with the Hudson's Bay Fur Company for territory, and many people in Montreal believed his intention was to found an exceedingly strong line of trading posts, with the intent of taking over the entire fur trade.

Colin had been instructed to go here or there at will, so that he kept in touch with what might be going on near about Mackinaw and St. Louis which had any connection with Lord Selkirk's project.

I could understand full well that we Nor'-westers stood a chance of being hurt in pocket if the nobleman was bent in establishing another trading company in America, and straightway made up my mind that Colin and I were on what might be considered the same business, therefore had no hesitation in telling him why I had come.

"John Jacob Astor, of New York, is also trying to get a hold on the fur trade here-about," I said to my friend, and he opened his eyes wide in astonishment. "It is reported

that he counts on making a headquarters on the Pacific coast, with a line of posts 'twixt here and there, and one of his partners is likely to come to Mackinaw very shortly, on his way across the country ; therefore have I been sent to see what may be done."

" We will join forces ! " Colin cried with no little excitement. " My Lord Selkirk's colonizing scheme, and Mr. Astor's Pacific Company, are like to hurt your people as well as mine, and with two of us on guard we should be able to know all that is being done."

I was of his mind, and before another day had come we two lads had formed a private partnership in the business of spying upon any strangers who might come our way.

He had been given a crew of six voyageurs, and I had a party of eight, therefore we counted ourselves able to do very much as we pleased, although it was agreed among us that we would hold aloof from our men, allowing it to be believed that the boatmen were simply spending the summer in gaiety, as was the custom of such people after earning a pocket-full of money, and we only a couple of lads who had been permitted to accompany them.

From the way in which I have set all this down, it would seem as if Colin and I had arrived at an understanding immediately after we came together, whereas, as a matter of fact, so afraid had each been lest he should disclose an important trade secret, that the day and a goodly portion of the night were spent before we were fully in accord.

We decided that our crews should mess together, and lest it appear as if we lads held higher positions in our respective companies than we desired should be known, Colin and I not only shared quarters with the men, but confined ourselves to the same rations they had, which consisted chiefly of corn and melted fat, such as is brought from the post at Detroit.

Lest there should be some who do not know what the "Detroit pudding" is like, although that hardly seems probable, I will set down the method of preparing it, at the same time stating that it, with pemmican, made up the greater portion of our daily bill of fare while on a journey. The corn is first hulled, by boiling it in a strong alkali, and then dried; after being boiled again, with a due propor-

tion of melted suet, and salted, it forms a thick pudding which is easily prepared and conveniently carried.

I know that there was never an agent, trader or hunter in Mackinaw who suspected us of being other than two lads who had come by the grace of the voyageurs to spend our time and money at the post, and therefore it was we were able to send to Fort William and Montreal from week to week much information of more or less value regarding these new people who were casting envious eyes on the fur trade of America, which of right, from my point of view, belonged solely to us Nor'westers.

I would like to copy down here a printed description of Mackinaw which I found since being a man grown, and have kept by me to be added to this tale if, perchance, the fancy of completing it ever grew strong upon me.

"It was the great place of arrival and departure of the southwest fur trade. Here the Mackinaw Company had established its principal post, from whence it communicated with the interior and with Montreal.

"Mackinaw was a mere village, stretching

along a small bay, with a fine broad beach in front of its principal row of houses, and dominated by the old fort, which crowned an impending height. The beach was a kind of public promenade, where were displayed all the vagaries of a seaport on the arrival of a fleet from a long cruise. Here voyageurs frolicked away their wages, fiddling and dancing in the booths and cabins, buying all kinds of knickknacks, dressing themselves out finely, and parading up and down, like arrant braggarts and coxcombs.

“Now and then a chance party of ‘Northwesters’ appeared at Mackinaw from the rendezvous at Fort William. These held themselves up as the chivalry of the fur trade. They were men of iron; proof against cold weather, hard fare, and perils of all kinds. Some would wear the Northwest button, and a formidable dirk, and assume something of a military air. They generally wore feathers in their hats, and affected the ‘brave.’ ‘I am a man of the north,’ one of these swelling fellows would exclaim, sticking his arms akimbo and ruffling by the Southwesters, whom he regarded with great contempt, as men softened

by mild climate and the luxurious fare of bread and bacon.”¹

Well, Colin and I loitered around the post with eyes and ears wide open, but learned nothing of importance until that day came when one of Mr. Astor's partners arrived, and then we knew that he counted on hiring at this place his men for the journey to the Pacific coast at the mouth of the Columbia River.

Colin sent one of his crew back to Montreal with this information, and I despatched a member of my party to Fort William, after which we watched the efforts made by Mr. Hunt (the new trader) to enlist able men for his service, which promised to be a difficult task. While it was progressing slowly, we heard a rumor of a movement to unite the Southwest Company with the one which was being formed by Mr. Astor, and from that hour we learned very much which promised to be of interest to our employers.

It may seem strange, although at the time it was the most natural thing possible, that Colin and I should make a comrade of one of the enemy, for in such light did we look upon

¹ Washington Irving.

the officers of the new fur company and the agents of my Lord Selkirk, and yet so we did within four and twenty hours of his arrival.

A lad by name of Robert Drexel, a full year younger than Colin or I, being but just turned fifteen, was among those who accompanied Master Hunt, and a more forlorn-looking boy than he as he stood on the shore gazing up at the fort, I hope never to see again.

Remembering the day when I left Montreal on the journey to Fort William, and realizing how much of sickness was then in my heart, I went up to the lad with outstretched hand.

"Are you of the new company?" I asked, and he laughed in a sad sort of fashion as he replied hesitatingly :

"I hardly know whether to say yes or no to that. It is true I came with Master Hunt to this forsaken place; but whether he counts me with him, or something to be dropped here like a bad bargain, I can't make out."

"You can never have been in the wilderness if you call this a forsaken place," I said, looking around on the voyageurs, traders and Indians who were lounging about in all their bravery of costume.

"We have been in the wilderness all the time since leaving New York," he replied as if stating a fact, and Colin, who came up at that moment, laughed boisterously.

"You will know what the wilderness is like before arriving at the Pacific Ocean, if indeed your company gets there; but so far you have seen only towns and settlements."

"Is it indeed so, or does he make game of me?" the lad asked with a look very like that of fear on his face.

Neither Colin nor I had any thought or desire to dissuade the lad from his purpose, yet we came so near to doing it unwittingly that I verily believe he would have turned back then and there had he met with any party traveling in the direction from whence he came.

Master Hunt gave little heed to this young member of his company, and Robert Drexel, or Bob, as we soon came to address him, spent most of his time in our company.

Of course the Nor'westers and the members of the Mackinaw Company discouraged the ablest of the voyageurs and the hunters whenever it seemed as if the new agent, Master Hunt, was likely to win them over by promise

of big salaries, or an unusually large share of the profits, although no one came out openly in an effort to prevent him from making up his crew, else would he have been there until this day.

Not until near to the middle of August did Master Hunt succeed in getting together a company, and then it was no child's task to start them on the long journey. He had found it necessary to make advances of money to nearly every one, and when he announced that the party would leave on a certain day, we who had had some experience in such kind of work knew full well that he stood more than a fair show of being mistaken.

Four times did Bob Drexel bid us "good-bye," believing that when the sun rose again his face would be set toward the Rocky Mountains, but on each occasion was he disappointed, and when the departure was finally accomplished, the lad found himself apparently abandoned.

Master Hunt, on a certain night when recruits were holding a revel in one of the booths on the shore, had rounded the entire outfit up, packing them aboard the canoes be-

fore they were fully aware of what was being done to them.

I had seen the same trick played more than once before, and understood that Master Hunt had too much on his hands to give any heed to the homesick lad ; but Bob was nearly heart-broken when we turned out next morning and heard that the new company had finally succeeded in getting away from the post.

“What shall I do? Oh, what shall I do?” he cried as if there was no other place in the world for him save with the Astor people, and I, forgetting for the moment how helpless he was on the trail or in a boat alone, said with but little of concern :

“Push on after them, lad. You can count it as certain they don’t go very far the first day, and the paddling to this night’s camp won’t strain your arms overmuch.”

“But I don’t know the way!” he cried helplessly. “And even if I did, I couldn’t come anywhere near handling a canoe.”

“And yet you’re counting on going into the wilderness,” Colin exclaimed, most likely wondering, as did I, why Master Hunt had

brought such a useless bit of timber away from the city.

"I've got to go there," the lad replied as if the tears were very near his eyelids. "I can't go to New York alone, and it's certain I won't be able to stay here with never a dollar to pay for food or shelter."

"Where are your people?" Colin asked.

"I've got none in this world, and that's why I enlisted for the fur trade; but it was understood that I should go in the ship which started from New York. Only at the last moment did Master Hunt decide to take me with him on the overland journey, and then I knew so little about what might be met that I didn't have sense enough to object. Now I'm left here alone. What shall I do?"

Colin seemed no less concerned for the boy than was I, and said half to himself, while his eyes rested on the lad:

"I suppose it won't cost us very much labor to put you with your party, even though we wait until to-morrow."

"That is the very idea," I exclaimed, wondering why I had not thought of so simple a solution to the riddle. "Cheer up, Bob, Colin

and I will drop you in Master Hunt's arms within the next eight and forty hours, and never think we've been out on anything more than a pleasure excursion."

A simple-hearted fellow was the lad from New York; but one who could be true as steel in time of trouble, as we afterward came to know, and when Colin and I had thus taken charge of the matter, his face brightened as does the sky after a sudden storm.

After having declared our willingness to do what we might toward sending the lad into the wilderness, Colin and I began to realize that perhaps we ought not to leave the post at a moment's notice. Even though we met with no obstacles, the journey would necessitate our being absent four days, providing we delayed setting off until another sun had risen, and I questioned if I was doing my full duty in going away when it was possible to learn what would be of importance to my employers.

"It appears to me that your work here is finished," Colin said when I privately put before him that which was in my mind. "You were sent to learn what the Astor

crowd might do, and surely you're not thinking that another party from the same company may be sent this way?"

"True, and instead of pushing Bob's matters, I should be on my way back to the post."

"Of that I'm not so certain," the lad replied. "It is rumored that some of Lord Selkirk's agents are at St. Louis; Mr. Astor's partner is heading the same way, and it seems to me you and I will be but carrying out our orders if we go down the river to make certain of what these new traders are about."

There was no good reason why I might not journey as far as St. Louis, even though there was no business to be done for my employers, providing it pleased me to thus spend my time, and, as Colin put the matter, it seemed as if I was in duty bound to know whether Master Hunt really started across the country, or if he made an effort to establish posts in what we had come to consider our territory.

Therefore it was I allowed myself to believe the journey was for the benefit of my company, rather than one of pleasure, and, that matter settled, the question of voyageurs came up. Each of us had sent out messengers to

our respective employers as the news which we gathered had warranted, until now we had between us no more than one full crew for either canoe.

It was finally decided that we would take but one boat, leaving the other until our return, for both Colin and I must of a necessity come back to Mackinaw in order to reach our respective posts, and since my canoe was the largest and staunchest, we chose her.

Not until a full four and twenty hours had passed were we ready to set off, and then, much to my anger and chagrin, we found that our voyageurs were no more eager to leave the attractions of the post than were those hired by Master Hunt. In other words, at the appointed time never a man of either crew showed himself, and there was nothing left for Colin and me to do save make a tour along the beach in search of the boatmen.

The day was half spent before we lads succeeded in getting the rufflers together, and then our wisest course would have been to hold them in quarters until next morning, to the end that we might strike one of the usual

camping-places when the first day's journey had been brought to a close ; but I was doubtful if that could be done, therefore persuaded Colin to make a start at once.

We took on board ten packages of provisions, that being more, perhaps, than would be needed during the journey ; but in the wilderness he is wise who carries two packages too many rather than one too few.

All goods and provisions in the wilderness are made up into compact bundles, each weighing about ninety pounds, and this for convenience in making portages, where each man is supposed to carry one package, although I have often seen our boatmen shoulder two without much ado.

The canoe in which I had come from the fort was of sufficient size to demand a crew of eight men, including the foreman, who, remaining in the bow, is always on the lookout in order to direct the course, and the steersman. These last named two carry the canoe over the portages. If Colin and I had been setting out on a trading voyage, we would have taken no less than twenty-five packages of goods, and ten of provisions, which would

have formed a full cargo for a craft carrying eight men.

The foreman is in charge of the canoe, but the middlemen—meaning those at the paddles—are supposed to obey both him and the steersman, and it goes without saying that these voyageurs of ours work as if for life at the word of command, for in a rapid stream, or when the Indians are in a black mood, there is no time for hesitation if one would save his body or his hair.

We three lads, meaning Colin, Bob and myself, played the part of passengers at the outset of the journey, for we were minded to make it a pleasure excursion so far as lay in our power, and before we were well away from Mackinaw the boy from New York had come to have a new idea as to the possibilities of traveling in the wilderness.

We had not heard Master Hunt say what route he counted on taking, but it was reasonable to suppose he would go to Green Bay, down the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers to Prairie du Chien, and thence down the Mississippi to St. Louis, after which he would travel northward until arriving in the Mandan country.

Then he might move due west as the mountains permitted.

I had no care on my mind as to whether we overtook the new trader in one day or six, for there seemed little possibility but that we would be able to make two miles to his one.

So long as he could remain with Colin and me Bob was well content, and I fancied it would please him better if he did not see his employer until that moment when it became absolutely necessary that we three should part company.

Colin was bent only on enjoying himself, as were all our voyageurs, now they had been forced to leave behind the gaiety of Mackinaw, and, therefore, I question if ever a canoe was freighted with so much of happiness, and so little of care, as was ours when we paddled away from the post with the songs of our boatmen floating astern on the gentle summer breeze.

We made camp twenty miles or more from our point of departure, for I was not minded to urge the crew too sharply during the first two or three days of the journey, and Bob must have taken it for granted that we always

traveled at such a leisurely pace, for he said half to himself when I gave the word to pull ashore :

“ Master Hunt didn’t know how to get along, that’s certain, for he seemed to have the idea that we must keep the boat moving just so long as the crew could handle the paddles.”

I could not but smile at the lad’s ignorance, and at the same time there was somewhat of sorrow in my heart because of the fact that whether he remained with us, or joined his employer, he must soon come to know the sufferings and hardships which went to the making of a trader’s life.

CHAPTER II

STRANGERS

DURING the first four hundred miles of our journey, we traveled like factors instead of penniless clerks, and, save in the matter of keeping our boatmen at the paddles until a fairly good day's work had been performed, allowed the crew to do much as they pleased.

Then we were come near to the mouth of Rock River, being, as a matter of course, on the Mississippi, drifting lazily down stream, but keeping a sharp lookout for evil-disposed Indians, when we were hailed from both banks at the same instant, and in a twinkling every person in the canoe, save Bob, seized his gun with the belief that it would speedily be needed as a means of defense.

The alarm gave place to astonishment when we saw that those who had called out were white men, and then I grew suspicious of a trick, else why had these two the width of the river between them? It never came into my mind that they might have seen each other

for the first time when the noise of our paddles brought them out from among the foliage, and I hesitated to answer the question which could be read in the steersman's eyes, until Colin asked sharply :

"Will you give no heed to their cries? It may be they are in distress."

"How can that be?" I asked, speaking sharply, because of my nervousness. "There is no lack of water; each man has a gun, therefore he need not be hungry, and if they wish to go to St. Louis, their legs will soon carry them there."

"Have you any reason to believe they would work us mischief?" the lad asked.

"None, except that which you would call exceedingly silly."

"And what may that be, if it's not a secret?"

I felt a certain sense of irritation, without being able to say why, and replied with more of heat than should be allowed when speaking to a friend :

"It is simply in my mind that they mean to do us an ill turn—I have imagined it, if you will."

"But surely they can't hope to make very

much trouble with a party as large as this, and there can be no harm in asking what is wanted."

I was ashamed of having lost my temper like a child, and without any reason whatsoever, therefore when Colin spoke so lightly I signaled the steersman to swing in to the eastern bank of the river.

When we were come within a dozen yards of the shore it was possible to see, as he ran through the foliage keeping pace with the canoe, a half-breed, well-armed and comfortably clad, whose face would have inspired distrust anywhere, and, motioning the middlemen to hold the craft where she was, I cried out :

"What is the matter? Why did you hail?"

"Are you bound for St. Louis?" he asked.

"Ay."

"And you will take me aboard?"

"I am not so certain of that. Why is your mate on the other side of the river?"

"He's no mate of mine," the man replied, shading his eyes with his hand as he gazed scrutinizingly across the stream. "I didn't

know he was there till I heard him hail you."

"Think you he also wants to go to St. Louis?" I asked with, perhaps, a tinge of irony.

"How should I know? Would it be wrong if he did?"

The fellow spoke in a sulky tone, and I fancied he was much the same as daring me to refuse him a passage down stream, yet I knew of no good reason why his request should be denied, and, with the idea of learning how Colin looked at the matter, I asked my comrade:

"What say you? Shall we take him on board?"

"He can't do much mischief unless we all fall asleep," he replied with a hearty laugh, and I, ashamed of having shown myself such a simple, motioned for the steersman to set the canoe on to the bank.

The fellow came aboard as if we were his very humble servants, and without addressing himself to me, Colin said sharply, when the fellow had settled himself down in the bottom of the canoe as if he were the only person of importance on board:

“Up Lake Superior way we have an odd belief that one who receives a favor should at least make known to whom it has been granted.”

“Meanin’ that you want to know my name?” the stranger asked gruffly, turning his head until I could see his evil looking, black eyes.

“Ay, it would seem as if something of that kind might make matters a bit more smooth,” the lad replied curtly, and I motioned the foreman to stand across the river.

“I’m known as Sam Rose when I’m among friends, an’ I’ve been up in this section lookin’ for a likely place to trap when the furs are good.”

“What company are you working with?” I asked more eagerly than was wise.

“I can’t say as yet. With so many new concerns startin’ up it seems as if a man might afford to dicker some.”

“He can’t spend much time at that sort of sport, unless he counts on outfittin’ himself,” Colin said with a laugh, and Sam Rose, if indeed that was his name, swung his shoul-

ders squarely around, much as if to show that he had no further desire to hold converse with us.

By this time the canoe had been brought under the bank where the second stranger stood awaiting us, and with this one we were not forced to fish for information.

"Which of you commands this 'ere boat?" the man asked, standing erect as if to give us a full view of himself.

I raised my hand to show that I was in authority, and at the same time thinking I had never seen a face that pleased me better. The stranger was not young, neither did he appear to be old; it would have been difficult to set his age with any certainty, but one might see at a glance that he was thoroughly at home in the wilderness, and I fancied he gazed at Sam Rose as if questioning where he had seen him before.

Addressing himself frankly to me, he said in a businesslike way:

"Donald Stewart is my name; I've heard that a new company is settin' out for the Pacific coast from St. Louis, an' would take it

a favor if you'd give me a lift down the river, for I'm of the mind to see the factor or agent before he leaves."

"You'll have plenty of time in which to see him," I replied, thinking possibly this man might give information which would be of service to my company as well as Colin's. "The agent cannot be more than two days in advance of us. Get aboard; we will give you passage as far as we go."

Stewart gave one sharp, scrutinizing glance at Rose before acting upon the invitation, and then took station well aft in the canoe, as if minded to keep at a distance from our other passenger.

After this delay the voyageurs sent the light boat ahead at a smart pace, as if to make up for lost time, and I would have entered into conversation with Donald Stewart, but that all his attention seemed to be fixed upon the shifty-eyed man forward.

Bob Drexel, well content with his pleasure of the moment, and too ignorant of wilderness-ways and dangers to be looking ahead for possible trouble, saw in our two guests only a couple of hunters whose coming had served to

break the monotony of lazily drifting down stream with never a decharge or a portage¹ to interrupt his idleness. He began to question Stewart as to the work of a hunter in that section, and the old man, minded to do whatsoever he might toward repaying us for the passage, set about telling stories of adventure until the eyes of the boy from New York were open wide with astonishment.

Sam Rose held his peace, and I, ever suspicious, began to fancy that it would have been more to his pleasure had we left the old hunter on the river bank, instead of taking him on board.

Once or twice during the day Colin found opportunity to speak with me in a whisper, and I learned that his opinion concerning our passengers was much the same as mine.

Not until we made camp that night was it possible for us to speak together privately, and then the lad said, as we two walked along the river bank, while the remainder of the party were making ready a most appetizing supper of Detroit pudding :

¹ The place where goods alone are carried over an obstruction is called a "decharge" ; and that where goods and canoes are both transported overland is termed a "portage."

"I'm not so foolish as to believe that fellow Rose can make any trouble for us; but I like his face so little that I would be glad of a good excuse for leaving him behind."

Before I could make reply Donald Stewart came within a dozen paces of where we were standing, being evidently in search of small game with which to garnish our pudding, and I beckoned him to approach, asking, when he was where I could speak without danger of being overheard by those near the boats:

"What do you know about this Rose?"

"Did you ever see him before?" he asked cautiously, as if fearing he might be led to say something disparaging of one with whom we were friendly.

"We met him for the first time when he hailed while you were on the opposite shore."

"Well, I don't want to give a man a black eye unless he deserves it; but I'm way out of my reckonin' if this 'ere Rose ain't in the pay of Manuel Lisa. Of course it can't be said that that's anything really agin him, for there's more'n one honest hunter or trapper who has dealin's with the Spaniard."

"Do you mean the head of the Missouri Fur Company?" I asked eagerly, remembering that this Spanish trader was not held in good repute among us of the Northwest, although it must be confessed that he was a most energetic and successful manager.

"Ay, lad, the very same, an' I've come to believe that Manuel wouldn't stop at anything when it was a question of puttin' a dollar or two more in his pocket."

"It stands to reason that he must have, among all those who gather furs for him, many an honest trader," Colin said as if simply giving words to his thoughts.

"True for you, lad; but this 'ere Rose ain't one of 'em. Why's he up here, when Manuel is at St. Louis makin' ready for the winter's work?"

"He might ask why you are here?" Colin said with a smile. "A trapper can't judge very correctly of the country in August, and a hunter knows that there are no indications in the summer which tell where game can be found in the winter."

The old man appeared disconcerted, and was at such a loss for words that I asked myself if

I had been mistaken when I set him down for an honest woodsman. He tried several times to find an expression that pleased him, and, finally, giving over the attempt, said bluntly :

“ If I knew more about you lads I might be willin’ to tell why I’ve been on the river lately.”

“ Is it just fair to ask us to unbosom ourselves that you may know why we are here ? ” I asked, realizing that now was the moment when I might say that which would work injury to my company.

“ You’re Nor’westers ? ” the old man said interrogatively, and I, not minded to deceive him, although it might be unsafe to trust him fully, replied :

“ I am of the Northwest Company. Colin is with the Mackinaw concern, and the other lad was hired by the Astor agent ; but left behind at the post. We are taking him on that he may join his people.”

“ An’ at the same time get wind of what is bein’ done by them as are breakin’ into the business, eh ? ” the old man said.

“ If we’re carrying our hearts on our sleeves as badly as that, the best thing we can do is

to turn back," Colin cried sourly, and Donald Stewart said soothingly :

"Don't fear but that you're keepin' the business to yourselves in proper shape ; but a man may pick up a good bit from your crew. It seems that I've guessed near enough to what you would say if the truth was to be told, an' there's no reason why I shouldn't set down my plans in plain words. I've heard that two or three new fur companies are talked of, an' it seems as if some of us old hunters might make a better bargain than ordinary, 'specially when the agents get to biddin' for men. I've been up north of Fort Snellin' watchin' them as have been sent by some British lord, who talks of buyin' the wilderness, as if we who've spent our lives in it haven't got any rights. Then I heard as how Manuel was at St. Louis, claimin' he was makin' ready for the winter's work, an' I says to myself that wherever an old fox like him lays 'round tellin' of his plans, considerable other game can be found, so I'm workin' down river with the claim of wantin' to see the Astor agent."

"And chiefly to benefit Donald Stewart," I

said with a laugh, relieved at thus learning that I had not misjudged the hunter when I pronounced him an honest man.

"Ay, lad, we're all bound to look sharpest after ourselves."

"But why is Rose here?" Colin asked impatiently.

"That's what I can't say; but I've got the right to guess he's been put up to something by Manuel Lisa. Keep him well under your eyes while we're in camp, an' he won't have any great show of doin' you harm, even if he's got it in mind."

Both Colin and I fell silent, whereupon Donald Stewart left us, as if thinking we might want to converse in private, as indeed we did, for what we had just heard suggested unpleasant possibilities.

The one question in both our minds was as to whether we were warranted in going very much further. By pushing on at our best pace we might succeed in overtaking Master Hunt before he arrived at St. Louis, and, having thus kept our promise to Bob, return to our respective posts without delay.

"That may be the best course," Colin said

thoughtfully when I made the suggestion to him; "but you never would have proposed it had we not heard concerning Manuel Lisa."

"Well?" I said questioninglly.

"We know him for an unscrupulous trader, who is ready to play fair or foul as best suits his purpose; but what will the Nor'westers say when your crew spreads the report that you turned back from a pleasure voyage through fear of one man, and that before you had ever come face to face with him?"

If Colin was eager for me to continue the voyage he could not have said anything better calculated to make me burn with the desire to push on at every cost.

"We will go on whether it may advantage the company or no," I said with somewhat of a sharpness in my tone, and the dear lad hastened to declare that he had not had it in mind to vex me.

"You have done nothing of the kind," I replied quickly. "You did but show me how my turning back now might be viewed by the Nor'westers, and thus rendered me a service. We will push on, lad, and, what is

more, present ourselves at Manuel Lisa's quarters as having come out of curiosity to see him."

"And very like he will greet us with every courtesy, yet be none the less on the alert to put a knife in our backs, by way of trade, if the opportunity offers."

Then we went over to the camp-fire, where we ate our full share of the pudding, and stretched ourselves out for a night's rest.

It was the duty of the foreman to see that the camp was properly guarded, and although my mind was disturbed because of distrusting the man who called himself Sam Rose, I gave no heed to what should have been my first care, simply because of never having attended to such matters.

After we had finished the evening meal I saw the shifty-eyed hunter walking to and fro along the river bank as if simply to stretch his legs, and I dismissed him from my mind as I listened to the speculations of Bob concerning the possibility of his ever becoming a valuable member of the fur-trading community.

I slept soundly that night, and all my

crew must have done the same, as I soon came to believe, for the sun was just showing himself when I heard a voice ask sharply :

“ Where is the canoe ? ”

“ Where she was left, stupid. Where else should she be ? ”

“ I don't see her under the bank. ”

By the time this had been said I was on my feet, and saw two of the voyageurs walking up and down the shore as if searching for something, while the remainder of my company were apparently wrapped in slumber.

“ What is it ? ” I cried, hurrying toward the river, we having slept beneath the shelter of a pine thicket a full fifty feet from the water's edge.

“ The canoe has drifted away, ” one of the men replied.

“ Who made her fast ? ” I asked angrily, and indeed I had reason for vexation when a boat could go adrift with a full crew to care for her.

“ I myself, ” the voice answered, and then I knew it was the foreman who spoke. “ She was properly cared for when I turned in, an' that I'll swear to. ”

By this time all hands were astir, yet I did not so much as look at a single person before asking :

“ Where is the man Rose, who wanted a passage to St. Louis ? ”

No one made reply for a moment, and then, as the men failed of seeing him they ran here and there, until we knew beyond a peradventure that the fellow whom we befriended had served us the scurviest trick that could be worked in the wilderness.

Not only was the canoe missing, but with her all our store of provisions, ammunition and spare clothing—everything, in fact, save what we wore and had in our hands when we landed.

There was little satisfaction to be had from berating the foreman, who was equally guilty with the thief because it was his duty to see that the camp was properly guarded, and instead of spending my breath upon him, I cast about to learn how the mischief might be repaired.

We were three hundred miles or more from St. Louis, to which post we must go in order to procure another boat and outfit, since it

would be little less than folly to think of retracing our course on foot to Mackinaw. And even when we were arrived at a place where such things as we needed could be purchased, how would it be possible for us to obtain them ?

At the headquarters of the Southwest Company it was not probable we would find either sympathy or credit for the employees of the Northwest or the Mackinaw Companies ; on the contrary, every effort would be made to hire our voyageurs to take service with Manuel Lisa, while Colin and I were left to work our way back as best we might, with the chances that the task could not be accomplished until another summer had come.

The outlook was most disheartening, view it in whatever light I might.

Bob Drexel, who could not be supposed to realize the full extent of the disaster which had overtaken us, laughed and chattered about the sport of walking to St. Louis while the weather was so agreeable, until I could stand the noise of his voice no longer, and went into the thicket where I might study the situation in silence.

Colin followed me, but held his peace, being unable to make any suggestion of value, and the two of us sat on the ground staring silently into each other's face until Donald Stewart came in search of us.

"If you lads had rather be alone, I'll go back," he said in a voice which sounded to me most friendly. "In case you want to chew the matter over with me, I may be able to give you a hint ——"

"You, better than any other, should be able to advise us!" I interrupted, and then, without waiting for him to speak, I laid the situation before him as it presented itself to me.

"I'm allowin' that you'll lose your crew at St. Louis," he said after a time; "but that is somethin' you must face, as you're forced by the stealin' of the canoe. The only question is whether you'll push on to the post, or turn about for Mackinaw at once?"

"On foot, without provisions, ammunition, or clothing for winter weather, we cannot go back!" I cried petulantly. "The snow would be upon us before half the distance was covered, provided we could keep ourselves alive."

"There's no danger of starvin' 'twixt here an' there, although I'm free to admit that you'd turn in hungry many a night. What have you in mind, lad?"

"Do you think we could get credit at St. Louis when it was known who we are?" Colin asked, and the old man shook his head decidedly.

"If Manuel Lisa finds out that one of you is a Nor'wester, he'd have pleasure in watchin' you starve."

"And his will comes precious near being law at St. Louis!" I cried bitterly.

"Ay, lad; but even the oldest fox can be outwitted."

"How in this case?" I cried excitedly, for Stewart spoke as if he already had some plan in mind whereby our condition might be bettered.

"I don't reckon that I could do myself very much good by hangin' out for extry terms from these new agents, so I'll go to Manuel an' bargain for another season, though it does go agin the grain to turn over my pelts to him."

"How can that concern us?" Colin asked

in surprise. "Our situation remains unchanged even though you bound yourself to him for the next ten years."

"You hadn't heard my plan," the old man said softly. "If I bind to him for the comin' season, I get my outfit, eh?"

"Of course," Colin replied irritably.

"And my credit will be good for a canoe?"

"That goes without saying," Colin interrupted. "We hope you'll have a good season; but just now you can't expect that we're very deeply interested in your plans."

"When I'm outfitted there's nothin' to prevent my workin' up toward Fort William. You lads can make good for what we use of the outfit, an' if I don't bring back many pelts Lisa can't help himself."

Now it was that I gazed at the old man in astonishment. In order to aid two lads whom he had never seen before, the hunter was willing to sacrifice at least half a year's work, and that without question of repayment. It was the most generous proposition I had ever heard, and for the moment I could make him no reply.

Colin first found his tongue, and he said in tone which told that he was deeply touched by the offer :

"It isn't right that Louis and I should allow you to do anything of the kind, and yet, unless we accept what seems like a real wrong to yourself, we are in mighty hard traits. I will answer for it, however, that when we come to Montreal you shall receive as much in value as Manuel Lisa would pay for all the furs you could gather in a winter."

"And at Fort William, if the Nor'westers don't load your canoe because you've helped one of their company, you shall have from the wages already due me, that which will repay you for the season if you do not take a single skin."

"I didn't count on gettin' anything back, ads; but only to do you sich a turn as I'd like done to me if I was in bad luck. There's no question but that I'll carry out my end of it all right, providin' we can shut the eye of Manuel Lisa, an' that won't be child's play. He'll most likely know before we get there what Rose has done, an' if he thinks it'll be join' the Nor'westers a bad turn by keepin'

you lads in St. Louis, it'll be snug figgerin' to get away."

"Do you think it would be best for us to wait somewhere this side of the post until you can make your trade with him?" Colin asked, and the old man replied promptly:

"Not a bit of it, lad. If you don't show up there the old fox will be certain you've got some game afoot, an' watch me till I can't breathe without his knowin' jest how much wind I suck in. My idee is to toddle along as if the loss of the canoe didn't worry you a little bit, for you're bound to keep a close mouth when the crew can hear what's said; they'll soon be workin' for the Missouri Company, an' won't make bones of tellin' all they know about a Nor'wester."

I tried to thank the old man for his kindness, but the proper words would not come at my bidding, and I could only wring his hand in silence, after which we went back to where our melancholy-looking voyageurs were preparing breakfast from the limited amount of provisions which had been left ashore the previous night. Bob was as cheery as ever, seeing nothing of trouble in this loss of the

canoe, save that it might serve to prolong the journey, and that was exactly to his liking, for he seemed to believe that the coming days would be as full of pleasure and idleness as those which had passed since we turned our backs on Mackinaw.

Colin and I both contrived to appear as if our hearts were as free from care as Bob's, whereat the voyageurs looked at us in surprise, and I said, making a great effort to speak in a cheery tone :

“We might be worse off, lads, for what is a jaunt of three hundred miles through the woods at this season of the year, to men like you? Eat well, and when hunger has been satisfied we will show the pork-eaters at St. Louis what men from the north can do !”

CHAPTER III

ST. LOUIS

THE chief thought in my mind when I urged the voyageurs forward, as if this tramp of three hundred miles was the one thing above all others that would give me pleasure, was regarding the man Rose, who had reduced us to such a strait.

If we had announced many days in advance of our departure from Mackinaw, that we were bound on a journey down the Mississippi, I would have said without hesitation that he had been sent by Manuel Lisa to delay us so far as might be possible, yet I failed to guess why it might benefit the trader to work us a mischief.

It was certain, however, that no word regarding us could have been taken to St. Louis, save that one might have said a crew of Nor'westers was at Mackinaw, and equally positive Rose could not have come up the

river for the sole purpose of working us harm.

Such being the case, why had he taken our outfit and canoe after we had virtually promised to take him with us as far as St. Louis?

"There is more to it than you or I can figure out yet a while; but we needn't rack our brains over the puzzle now," Colin said at length. "We'll know sooner or later, and since the knowledge won't bring back the canoe, it can't make very much difference if the answer don't come to us immediately."

"But if Manuel Lisa had a hand in the matter, or if Rose thinks it might benefit the Spaniard to delay us, it's necessary we should know it," I persisted, whereupon Colin asked grimly:

"Why? We shall be on our guard against him, an' more we could not do even though we saw all his plans written down plainly."

The lad was in the right; but I could not dismiss the matter from my mind, however earnestly I might strive, and as the hours wore on I grew more and more disturbed.

Bob Drexel marched by the side of Donald Stewart, and, until nearly overcome by fatigue,

was the cheeriest member of the party, simply because in his ignorance he did not realize all the dangers of the situation.

Our progress was slow, chiefly because we were delayed at every creek too deep to be forded, in order to build a raft sufficiently large to carry ourselves and the small amount of baggage which had been left us.

During the first day's march we did not cover above twenty miles in distance, and encamped as nearly exhausted as if having made half a dozen portages.

There were many times during that journey when I said to myself that it would have been better had we put forth every effort to regain the post at Mackinaw, instead of advancing toward those whom we knew were, or would be, our enemies. If we were to suffer the pangs of starvation, there might have been some cheer in the knowledge that every mile traversed brought us so much nearer friends.

Colin bore up under the mental and bodily troubles much better than did I; but Bob Drexel made no pretense of patience. The hardships frightened him, and I believe of a verity that had I proposed to camp on the

river bank during the winter, he would have welcomed the idea with greatest pleasure, content to remain in the wilderness rather than press forward so painfully.

The old man, Donald Stewart, was the prop upon which we all leaned. His face was always bright, no matter how much we saw of troubles. In fact, he was leader, comrade and consoler in one, and that we ever arrived at the post where Manuel Lisa was all powerful, is due wholly to his efforts. Without him we would have given ourselves over to death; by his aid we finished the nightmare of a march after a time, and in no very serious condition of body.

It was after sunset on a certain day during the first week in September that we finally arrived at St. Louis, and, having swam across the river, the first object we stumbled over was our own canoe, which had been stolen by Sam Rose.

"I believe I shall shoot that villain on sight!" Colin muttered as we satisfied ourselves by a hurried examination that the craft had been lately in use, and Donald Stewart said soothingly :

“You won’t do anything so rash, lad. If he’s in the pay of the Spanish trader, an attack upon him would be much the same as compassin’ your own death. He’d never dared to scuttle off with your property unless he knew beyond a peradventure that Lisa would protect him, regardless of any proofs of his villainy that might be produced. Keep a close tongue, my boy, an’ don’t show by even a twist of the ear that you’re achin’ to settle an old score. Our time will come if we wait long enough.”

“It’ll be mighty hard work to keep my mouth closed if we come upon him,” Colin replied grimly, and then the old man led us along the shore to a cabin where he believed a welcome awaited himself and his friends.

Ours was a large and most forlorn looking party to be quartered on any one man; but yet the kindness and charity bestowed upon us could not have been more full and free.

Donald Stewart had led us to the cabin of an old boatman who, too old for active service in the wilderness, made a livelihood by mending or building canoes, trafficking with such

Indians as visited the post, and acting as a sort of agent for the voyageurs and hunters.

In addition to his cabin, divided into two apartments, he owned a shed, which, by some stretch of the imagination, might have been called a storehouse, and, stacked here, there and everywhere within these two buildings, was to be found such an assortment of odds and ends as, I dare venture to say, could not be found anywhere else in the world.

Master Stewart announced that we lads were his comrades and partners, and the voyageurs a crew in his employ ; but further than that he did not explain immediately.

Simon Southard, as the old hunter named him, did not display any curiosity because of our generally forlorn condition ; but without delay set about broiling a quantity of buffalo steaks, serving them, together with a plentiful supply of cornbread, when he had cooked enough to give each member of the party a generous portion, and while we ate ravenously he continued to throw upon the glowing coals slice after slice of meat, as if believing we were both able and willing to gorge ourselves after the custom of the Indians.

I verily believe that never before nor since have I partaken of so satisfying a meal as that in Southard's cabin, and certain it is my companions were quite as well pleased as was I.

The voyageurs, when they were filled to repletion, stretched themselves out at full length on the floor wherever a vacant place could be found, their eyes closing in slumber almost immediately, until none of our party save the old hunter, Colin and myself remained awake.

Then it was that Stewart, after he and our host had filled their pipes, told the story of the theft, and explained why and how we had come to St. Louis, disguising not the fact that among us all we did not have sufficient of money to pay for what we had just eaten.

"Sam Rose is still here," Southard said as the old man finished his story. "I saw him when he first struck the settlement, an' wondered why he'd been out in such a big canoe. He's engaged with Lisa, of course, an' is makin' ready for a tradin' voyage. Manuel counts on keepin' under his eye the agent of a new fur company, by name of Hunt, an' 'twixt you an' me, the stranger won't be any better

off because of what the Sou'westers may do for him."

"Is Hunt still here?" Stewart asked.

"Ay, but counts on pullin' out as soon as he can make ready."

"Does he reckon on pushin' across the country at this season?"

"Them as claim to know, say he's goin' up river till he strikes the ice, an' then make camp for the winter."

"Why don't he stay here?"

"That's what I can't rightly say; but I'm thinkin' that he don't cotton to Manuel overly much, an' believes he'll be better off at a distance from him."

"I thought you allowed that Manuel was makin' ready for a voyage?"

"That's what he is doin', an' I reckon that Hunt's way will be his way, for there are plenty here who say Manuel don't count on givin' the new company a chance to pick up any trade hereabouts. So these lads are Nor'westers, eh?" Southard added, looking at Colin and me as if we were a strange breed of animals.

"This one is from Fort William," and

Stewart motioned toward me; "the other belongs to the Mackinaw Company."

"I'm thinkin' this 'ere settlement won't be the pleasantest place in the country for Nor'-westers or Mackinaws, in case Manuel finds out that they're here. Who's the other lad?"

"He has come to join Hunt; he's of the Astor concern," the old man replied, and Southard said grimly:

"I must admit, Donald Stewart, that you've got a rare mix-up, an' while all hands are so hot about new traders comin' to poach on the Sou'west's reservation, it won't be the wisest thing in the world to let it be known who they are."

"Sam Rose knows somewhat concerning all of us," I said, speaking for the first time since the conversation began.

"Oh, he does, eh? Then Manuel is as wise as he, for they're both off the same pelt, an' first cousins to the wolves."

Our host fell to stroking his chin gently as if trying to solve some perplexing riddle, and I said to myself that we had acted the part of fools by sticking our noses into the mess, when we might have made a try at getting

back to Mackinaw. If Simon Southard believed it necessary for us to keep out of Manuel Lisa's sight, then was it certain that something more than ordinary discomfort threatened us here at this post of the Southwest Company.

It seemed much as if Donald Stewart did not want us to hear all that might be spoken by our host regarding the possible trouble ahead, for straightway he changed the conversation by speaking of matters in the past when, as I judged, he and Southard had been partners, and I, uneasy because of what had already been said, turned toward Colin for the purpose of discussing the situation with him.

"There is no good reason for crossing a bridge until we come to it," the lad said almost petulantly. "Let us enjoy the sensation of having full stomachs, and a shelter over our heads; to-morrow will be time enough to worry about what may come to us here."

Colin rolled over as if bent on going to sleep, therefore I stretched myself out beside him, but with no idea that I would be able to close my eyes in slumber, yet if Manuel Lisa and all his agents, traders, hunters and

trappers had been close at hand I could not have remained awake many moments after being in position to invite repose, and when next I was conscious of my surroundings, another day had come.

Donald Stewart was nowhere to be seen when I gazed around the shop, or storehouse, as perhaps it should be called; but Southard was preparing breakfast, assisted by a villainous looking half-breed, and since we were guests who might not be able to pay promptly for that which we received, it seemed to me as if we should present ourselves at table immediately after receiving the summons, lest we cause the host additional labor, therefore I aroused Colin and Bob without delay.

When the meal was ready Donald Stewart yet remained absent, and I noted with no little concern the fact that only two of the boatmen were present. It was by no means to my liking that any of the party should stroll through the town where Manuel Lisa's agents might get at them, and I said as much to our host when seated by his side to partake of the generous supply of food set before us.

"I reckon Donald is in much the same

way of thinkin'," Southard replied in a tone which caused me to believe he was vexed because our voyageurs were abroad so early. "He went out in search of 'em."

If the old man was attending to the matter then surely I need not borrow very much trouble, and I set about breaking my fast in a most satisfactory fashion.

Bob Drexel was as happy as a lark ; now that he was in a land of plenty he forgot all the sufferings of the past.

When the meal had come to an end we three lads stepped outside the cabin, where we could have a view of the town, and there, seated on the sand, awaited the coming of Donald Stewart.

I was surprised to find that St. Louis was a much more important settlement than Mackinaw. Four or five brick houses were to be seen ; there were several shops outside the company's quarters, and the streets seemed to be filled with people. On the river there were more keel-boats than canoes, and the boatmen were of a different type from our voyageurs, although, to my surprise, there were many of these last lounging around.

It was a busy, bustling place to which we had come under such stress of circumstances, and I began to think that the Southwest Company was a much stronger concern than our people had been willing to admit.

"I had thought ours was the only company of any real weight, not excepting yours," I said to Colin; "but this looks as if I have been mistaken."

"There are many independent traders here," the lad replied thoughtfully.

"You mean there are many who fancy they are independent; but of course they must get their goods from Lisa's shops, and he really owns them all."

"Ay, I'll admit that, if he's the keen trader they give him credit of being. Just now, Louis, I'm more concerned about ourselves than regarding the Spaniard's business capacity."

"There's little need for me to say I've got the same anxiety on my mind; but until Donald Stewart comes back, we can't form any plans. He is the one on whom we must rely for advice as well as assistance."

"It strikes me that we can at least make a show of helping ourselves."

"In what way?"

"There is our canoe over yonder, and we can bring her up here, unless you're afraid to claim your own property."

"Not a bit of it!" I cried hotly. "Of course we will take her, and I've been hoping that Southard might help us get back at least a portion of the goods stolen by Rose."

"I'll go after that craft now," and as Colin rose to his feet Bob followed the example, saying as if some especial amusement was on foot:

"I'll go with you, and if the rascal shows up we'll have one whack at him to repay us in some degree for what we've suffered since he served us such a scurvy trick."

Before I could make any protest, even had I been so disposed, the two lads were walking rapidly down the river bank toward that point where we had seen our canoe the evening previous.

At that moment Southard called me into the cabin that he might ask some questions about Mackinaw, and I sat there idly chatting ten minutes or more, when we were startled by a sudden outburst of noise from the river,

amid which I could hear our old rallying cry of "Nor-nor-nor'west!" repeated again and again as if by half a dozen voices.

There is no fellow, whether he be Nor'-wester, Mackinaw, or Hudson's Bay man, who would not, when anywhere near the Sou'-wester's territory, rally at that alarm, and without stopping for weapons I ran at full speed out of the cabin, closely followed by Southard and two or three half-breeds.

Once in the open air I could see a throng of hunters, trappers, Indians and voyageurs near the bank of the river, as if taking part in a free fight, and on the instant came the thought that Colin had, by trying to get possession of our canoe, started the war, if Lisa was decided that we lads were worth the candle.

Shouting the Nor'west cry at the full strength of my lungs, I flung myself upon the outer fringe of the crowd, striking right and left to the best of my ability in order to force a passage through to where the principals of the squabble would be found, and soon coming to realize that there were many among the throng who were there solely to prevent any

one from aiding those who continued to cry for help. Instead of returning my blows, these men who played the part of obstacles pressed yet more closely toward the centre, presenting a barrier which I found well nigh impregnable, while others came up behind, hemming me in in such a fashion that I was soon unable to use my fists to any advantage.

"Nor-nor-nor'west!" could be heard first from this direction and then that, and I soon came to recognize the voices of Colin and Bob, thus showing, to me at least, that they were the ones who had started, or provoked, the fight.

It was when I had almost begun to despair of being able to force my way through the throng, and was burning with rage, that I heard Donald Stewart's voice close behind me.

"Why don't you get through, lad? Our people are beset!"

"Ay, so they are; but Rose evidently has friends here who are too cowardly to stand face to face with a lad of the north, but yet take sides with him by hemming me in till I can't raise a hand."

"We'll soon put an end to that kind of a

game!" the old man cried angrily, and, turning my head ever so slightly, I could see him swinging a heavy club, bringing down a man at every blow without giving heed or count to the heads he might break.

I have seen many a man in a rough-and-tumble fight, for such amusements are not rare in our section of the country; but never one who could do more execution than Donald Stewart. Whoever was so unlucky as to get a blow from him no longer had any stomach for battle, and before he had felled six of the crowd those immediately in advance were more than willing to give way.

He literally hewed a path for himself, and when he stood by my side the way was open before us.

I could see Colin and Bob standing manfully in front of Rose and half a dozen of his fellows, and what sent the blood bounding yet more furiously through my veins, was the fact that the lads were holding the scoundrels in good play.

I would have drawn the knife that hung from my belt, as soon as my arms were free, but Master Stewart shouted:

"Drop that, lad! You may use a club if you like; but it is forbidden to draw a weapon that will kill."

"If the one you're swinging won't kill then I'm out of my reckoning," I replied, steadied somewhat by the sound of the old man's voice, and, failing to find anything that might answer my purpose, I ran forward with naked hands, counting on getting in at least one fair blow on the jaw of Master Rose.

Fortune smiled on me, for which I was truly thankful. Rose, who just at that instant was bent on crushing Bob with a single stroke, but was getting fairly good proof that the youngster was too nimble for him, observed that his henchmen were suddenly giving way, and turned to see what might be the cause.

Then it was that I came upon him, and before he could guard his face I struck a blow near the eye that sent him staggering back against his friends.

"Leave him to me!" I cried when Bob would have joined forces with me against the villain. "If I can't handle him it's time I counted myself a pork-eater!"

There was no reason why any of our party should remain idle when the odds were at least three to one against us, and the little fellow from New York found plenty of work with a big river-boatman, who came into the fight as if believing he could crush Bob simply with the weight of his hand. Even while watching an opportunity to get in another blow on Rose, I saw our comrade from the Astor Company give the river bully a staggering blow on the jaw, and then leap back as quickly as a cat, before the big fellow had a chance to return the compliment.

Rose and I had been at work no more than thirty seconds when I realized that it would not be a hard task to give the scoundrel a sound drubbing, provided he did not succeed in getting his arms around me, therefore I set about the task sharply yet warily.

Donald Stewart was swinging his club with such telling effect that unless we lads got in our work quickly there would be no enemies to stand against us, and here and there I could see one of our voyageurs trying conclusions with Manuel Lisa's boatmen.

Twice I knocked Rose down at no other

cost than a slight blow on the body, and it was evident that the stealer of canoes would turn tail at the first opportunity, therefore I pressed him closely, sending in my blows so rapidly that it dazed him. Before many minutes he stood waving his arms aimlessly in the air after the fashion of a weather-vane, and I repaid him for our long, hungry tramp through the wilderness.

He stood the punishment until his cowardly heart was well-nigh broken, and then he ran like the cur that he was, I following close behind until I heard the old hunter shouting peremptorily :

“Come back, Louis Wills! Come back! You people from the north must hold well together just now, else are you speedily overcome!”

It was well the old man recalled me to a realization of the situation at that very moment, otherwise I might have run directly into the arms of half a score of Rose's friends, who were discreetly keeping out of the fight; but who would have been pleased to give me a taste of Southwest handling had I approached within safe and convenient reach.

When I rejoined my comrades I found that our crew were come together once more, having been called from their pleasures or sight-seeing by the rallying cry, and from the general appearance of all save the old hunter, they had taken a goodly share of punishment while showing Manuel Lisa's followers what we of the north could do.

Both Bob and Colin displayed ugly marks of the fray on their faces.

"Get back to Southard's!" Donald Stewart shouted as we stood massed in the centre of a throng of scowling trappers and Indians. "Keep well together, an' follow me."

Then it was that Bob Drexel showed of what stuff he was made, and from that moment, forgetting all his womanish ways, I loved the lad.

"We came out here to get the canoe, and I'm not goin' back without her!" he cried, wheeling about as he spoke and running to the river bank, where our craft was moored.

"Come here!" the old hunter cried angrily; but Bob gave no need, and I, not minded that the lad should go alone among that mob of pork-eaters who would not have hesitated to

set upon him in a body, small as he was, followed close at his heels.

Two or three of the idlers came forward ruffling as if to frighten us; but they took good care not to get within reach of my fists, and we gained that place on the bank where our canoe had been hauled up the night previous.

Now she was in the water, sunk to the length of her rope, and as Bob pulled her bow up I saw that some scoundrelly pork-eater had slashed both sides until the birch bark hung down like ribbons.

"Let her go!" I cried, standing between him and a fellow who was slouching up as if for mischief. "She won't pay for the mending, and there isn't watape¹ enough at this post to put her in proper shape."

"We came for her, and I'm going to take back as much as is left, whether it'll stand the patching or no!" he cried stoutly, and, despite all the danger which threatened, I laughed aloud, because he was showing pluck sufficient to warrant his standing among the best of the Nor'westers.

¹ The long slender roots of the white spruce, used by canoe-makers for binding together the strips of birch bark.

If it was the lad's whim to carry to Southard's cabin the remains of the canoe, I counted myself his comrade to the extent of aiding him, useless though the labor might be, and, keeping our eyes on the scoundrelly gang that were watching us, we hauled the wreckage out of water, carrying it on our shoulders along the bank as if making a portage.

Our people greeted us with wild cheers, closing in behind to prevent an attack, and it was a veritable triumphal procession as we marched toward our quarters, although I realized that by overcoming the enemy we had put ourselves in the way of being speedily worsted, when Lisa should hear of what had befallen his lieutenant.

CHAPTER IV

A DECLARATION OF WAR

THAT which first attracted my attention after we had gained a refuge in Simon Southard's cabin, was the expression of gravity, nearly approaching fear, which I saw on the faces of our host and Donald Stewart. Those two understood better than any of our company what might be the result of the encounter.

"How did it come about?" the old hunter asked of Colin, and the lad made no hesitation in telling his story.

"Bob and I found the canoe without any trouble. She was in the water, and made fast to the bank. I had hardly laid hold of the rope to pull her ashore when that scoundrel of a Rose came up, and wanted to know what I was counting on doing with his boat. I asked him if he had the brass to claim her as his property, and he swore there were a dozen men here at the post who could prove that he bought her of a Sioux Indian. Right then

the fuss began, and I want you to understand that Bob Drexel is a little glutton at fighting. I didn't allow he'd know how to put up his hands; but he downed a big river-boatman while I was getting ready to do my share, and had to jump a foot or more every time he landed a blow, because the fellow was so tall."

Our people cheered the lad till his face was as red as a ripe cherry, and when we had worked off a bit of enthusiasm, Donald Stewart said gravely :

"The boy fought like a man, an' it stands to reason you should feel proud of him; but I'm advisin' that you don't crow overly loud while we're here under Lisa's thumb, if he chooses to have it so. I'm not blamin' you for holdin' your own; but it's mighty unlucky that the row should have come just when it did."

"You mean that it's likely others will pick it up?" Colin asked.

"Meanin' that it'll serve as a pretext for whatever the Sou'westers want to do," the old man replied gravely, and Southard added :

"There's good reason to believe that Manuel Lisa won't look with a favorable eye to your

goin' back to your posts—at least, not this winter."

"Why not?" I cried angrily, and the voyageurs, who looked most warlike because of not having washed the blood from their faces, ruffled and swaggered as if to say there was no Southwester living who could prevent them from going wheresoever and whensoever it pleased them.

"Master Hunt, of the new company has, since he struck this post, taken into partnership, without requiring capital, Joseph Miller, a man whom Manuel Lisa has been tryin' for some months to get in his employ, an' the two have been makin' big offers to the best men the Sou'west have got. You'll find that Hunt won't be able to get away from St. Louis till the Spaniard is ready to follow at his heels, an' because he's allowin' to carry a high hand in this matter, Lisa ain't likely to let any one go from here to Mackinaw or Montreal with the story of what he counts on doin', until it's too late for any interference."

It was Simon Southard who made this explanation, and he spoke in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone which convinced me that he had

simply stated what he had good reason for knowing was the truth.

“If he holds us here after we are in condition to set out, he’ll be doing more than now seems possible,” I said, determined not to swagger, but to let my crew understand that we were not to be despised simply because a boy was in command.

“The better way, lad, is to look the situation squarely in the face, an’ if you have any idee of tryin’ conclusions with Lisa, keep it to yourself till the time comes to make a move,” the old hunter said with a note of warning in his tone, and Colin cried in a passion :

“Louis is right ! We’ll say or do whatsoever pleases us best, and if any Spaniard in St. Louis tries to dictate to us, he’ll find that two companions, either of whom could swallow him without buttoning back his ears, will send down here a force large enough to sweep the entire post into the river !”

At his boastful speech our voyageurs cheered till they were hoarse ; but it troubled me not a little because Southard and the old hunter held their peace. I was not relieved in mind by seeing our host going quietly outside the

cabin as if to learn whether any one might have overheard the words, for it showed me that he, who should have had the best idea of the situation, was far from being positive that Manuel Lisa would hold his hand simply because one of us was from the Northwest, and the other from the Mackinaw Company.

Judging from what I had already seen, the Southwest was quite as strong as either of the other companies, and I knew full well what our people would do if a couple of lads were in any way to interfere with their plans.

It was Donald Stewart who changed the subject of the conversation by saying abruptly, as he turned toward Bob :

"I reckon, lad, that it's time you reported your arrival to Master Hunt."

"Crickey! I'd clean forgot him!" Bob cried, and straightway he pulled down the corners of his mouth in a way that told how slight was the desire to see his employer. "I s'pose I've got to tell him I'm here."

"That's what, lad, an' it won't have a good look for you to linger longer."

"We'll go with you, Bob," I cried, saying to myself that if this new agent did not treat

the lad in proper fashion I would give him a hint of what was expected in the wilderness, for I was young, foolish and heady in those days.

"If you take my advice you'll stay where you are, an' let Sim do the business," Donald Stewart said sharply, and because I did not burn to quarrel with a man who had done so much to serve us, I held my peace.

Colin, carrying his head high, muttered something about not making a prisoner of himself simply because the Spanish trader was out of sorts, and poor little Bob, looking as if his last friend had deserted him, went out in company with our host, calling back to us:

"I'll see you chaps again before leaving this place."

"Of course you will," Colin replied cheerily. "We're looking for you to mess with us so long as you stay," and then straightway my comrade's face grew red as he realized that neither he nor I, who were living on the charity of Donald Stewart's friend, had any right to invite another to join the company simply because it pleased our fancy to have him with us.

While Southard was absent, the old hunter explained to us the situation as he believed it was, and gave much advice which would have saved us sorrow and suffering had we followed it implicitly.

We were yet discussing the matter, questioning how we might procure a boat and provisions without forcing Donald Stewart to bind himself to the Southwest Company, when Simon Southard returned, and, much to our surprise, in company with Bob Drexel.

There was on the lad's face an expression of mingled dismay and sorrow, otherwise I might have bantered him upon having come so soon to pay us a visit, and before it was possible to have spoken, had I been so disposed, I detected a meaning glance between the old hunter and our host, which gave me an inkling of the truth.

"Didn't you find the factor?" Colin asked in surprise.

"Ay, we found him," Bob replied despondently, "and it seems to be in his mind that if I had been the kind of a lad he wants, I would not have been left behind at Mackinaw."

"But he can't have suffered by your care-

lessness," Colin cried angrily. "He hasn't got so far on his voyage that you would have been of any great service."

"He doesn't look at it that way," Bob replied sorrowfully as he seated himself on a package of pelts, and I asked Simon Southard :

"Does the factor count on leaving the lad behind?"

"That's the way it looks to me, an' he's picked up the carelessness at Mackinaw as an excuse."

"But it's downright cruelty to bring a lad from New York and drop him here in the wilderness, where he can neither go forward nor back save some one takes pity on him."

"Ay, that's what it is; but Master Hunt won't listen to any excuses, simply because he don't want to hear any," Southard replied. "Put a man at the head of a tradin' company in the wilderness, an' he's much like any of the others about whom we make complaint. Manuel Lisa himself couldn't have done a more cruel thing than to leave this lad here."

"We'll show this Master Hunt from New York whether he can carry such a high hand!"

Colin exclaimed, and one who was not well acquainted with the lad, might have supposed that he had some secret means of punishing those who did not act in accordance with his desires.

Bob sat with his chin in his hands and eyes fixed upon a certain spot on the floor, as if studying the situation, and apparently giving little heed to our conversation, until I asked sharply :

“What do you count on doing, lad, if this high and mighty factor, who has begun to play the lord before having established his headquarters, refuses to take you with him?”

“It don’t seem to me that I need go so far as that in my figuring,” the lad replied with a smile that had in it little of mirth. “I can only hang on, watching for a chance, and take the first that comes my way, whether it be to go into the wilderness, down the river, or across the country to New York.”

“What then were you studying so earnestly?” Colin asked.

“How I might persuade Master Southard that his life would be the more pleasant if he hired me as clerk, dish-washer, or general as-

sistant," the lad replied with a smile that went straight to my heart. "It looks much as though I'd be forced to stay here all winter, and I can't well get on without something that may be called home."

"You shall stay so long as pleases you," Southard said promptly, and as if he meant all the words implied, and I added:

"Come with me, lad, and by this time next year you'll be able to call yourself a Nor'-wester."

"I'll go with you right gladly, Louis; but what kind of a figure do you reckon I'd cut ruffling around announcing that I was a man from the north?" Bob cried, with a laugh, as, springing to his feet, he aped the swaggerers he had seen at Mackinaw, doing it in such a grotesque fashion that we all burst into laughter, forgetting for the moment that we ourselves were in sore straits.

"Are you really minded to join us?" Colin asked eagerly, as if it would please him greatly to form such a partnership.

"Ay, that I am!" Bob cried with emphasis. "What better could I, who have proven myself useless in the wilderness, ask for than to

put myself in your care ; but is it a bargain to which your company will agree ? ”

“ There’s little need to bother your head about that part of it, lad,” the old hunter said grimly, “ since none of you are like to see any save Sou’westers until next summer.”

I looked up quickly and in alarm as Donald Stewart said this, and for the first time did I understand that he believed we would be forced to spend the winter at St. Louis, or in the wilderness.

“ If you are in the right as to that, how are we lads and our crew to live meanwhile ? ” Colin asked with a note of alarm in his voice, and the old hunter replied quietly :

“ I thought we had the same as settled that matter already, and it would be foolish to make very much talk about it now.”

While speaking he glanced at our voyageurs in a meaning way, and I understood that he was not willing they should hear of our plans ; but this seemed to me much like an excess of precaution, for surely Nor’westers would not betray their own people, more particularly to pork-eaters.

It so chanced, however, that we would not

8 AMONG THE FUR TRADERS

have discussed our plans just then, even if we had been willing every one should hear what we said, for Master Stewart had hardly ceased speaking when a certain noise from outside the cabin caused Colin to open the door.

I heard a howl of rage from the lad as he sprang through the opening, and then came a medley of shouts and angry voices which told that the enemy was again upon us.

In a twinkling the cabin was vacated, and as we ran out ready for the fray, I saw half a dozen river-boatmen making off with the fragments of our canoe.

The craft could never be made serviceable again, and these fellows had come for the wreck simply to teach us a lesson. They were behaving foolishly; but we proved ourselves to be yet more simple when we rushed upon them, making a fight for that which could be of no benefit to us.

However, we from the north did not stop to reckon up the gain which might be made, but set upon the pork-eaters manfully, and because we outnumbered them two to one, the battle was not prolonged.

In five minutes the scrimmage was at an

end; we had received and given a few more wounds, and to show for our loss of blood, the bits of wood and bark, which represented the craft stolen by Sam Rose, were dragged inside the cabin.

We were like children who quarrel over a broken toy, and then, having gained possession, throw it aside as worthless.

The pork-eaters beat a retreat because they could not well do otherwise; but, having got off at a safe distance, one of them halted to cry menacingly:

“You braggarts from the north shall know how we Sou’westers treat your kind! If you are in this town when another day has come, we will give you a dose that won’t set well on your stomachs!”

Then the pork-eaters slouched away slowly, as if going through inclination, and not beating a retreat.

“It’s a declaration of war!” Colin said grimly, when all our party were inside the cabin once more, and Donald Stewart added:

“I would we had given them no cause for making it. No matter how hot a fight we make, it’s certain we’ll be bested——”

"Which is better than acting like curs by letting them do whatsoever they please without protest," Colin replied sharply.

"I don't agree with you, lad," the old hunter replied gravely. "He who fights simply to gratify his pride, deserves to be whipped. Howsomever, they have given us warnin', an' I'm greatly mistaken if Manuel Lisa is not upholdin' 'em in their bullyin'."

"To what end?" I asked.

"That he may not be forced to show his own hand. To my mind he not only counts on holdin' you here till it's too late to go north this season; but is resolved on preventin' you from makin' friends with the factor of the new company."

"He needn't borrow trouble on that last score," Colin cried hotly. "We've seen enough of Master Hunt to convince us that we don't want to call him friend."

To this the old man was evidently on the point of making reply, but was interrupted by a knock at the door, and when our host answered it we saw standing outside a Canadian voyageur whom I could have sworn was

once, and not many months before, an employee of my company.

"I would speak with Jean Lafontaine," he said in a most respectful tone, and that member of our party to whom he referred stepped outside the cabin without waiting for permission.

"You are like to lose your voyageurs if those who are in Lisa's employ have speech with them," Master Stewart whispered in my ear, and I confidently replied :

"These pork-eaters cannot win over a Nor'wester."

"They must have done so, else why is that Canadian in Lisa's pay?"

Before I could reply our voyageur came into the cabin, and, after whispering to his comrades, said to me :

"Our countrymen here will give to us from the north a feast and a dance. We shall return in the morning."

Then was the moment for me to exercise my authority, and forbid any of the party to leave the cabin ; but my wits were wool-gathering, and before I came to my senses all the voyageurs had departed.

“ You have seen them for the last time,” our host said confidently. “ They are Sou’westers from this on.”

“ In that you are mistaken,” I replied, again speaking like a child. “ Even though they were willing to leave me, they would not forfeit the wages due them by the company.”

“ Lisa will make that good, an’ believe the bargain favorable to him,” Donald Stewart replied, and I began to suspect that the man was a coward, else he would not have harped continually upon what the head of the Southwest Company might be able to do.

Within a few moments he astonished me by saying, as if it was a matter which he had already decided :

“ I reckon that now has come the time when I must make my trade with Lisa. If I wait much longer we shall be at sword’s points, when it will no longer be possible to bargain.”

“ Why should you go to him ?” I asked suspiciously.

“ Have you forgotten, lad, that I was to agree to trap for him this winter, and thus get the outfit you from the north need in order to make your way to Mackinaw ?”

"That remained in my mind," I replied curtly; "but since you proposed the plan it has seemed to me the Spaniard has frightened you and Master Southard so thoroughly that you are content to do his bidding without heed to us lads."

Even while the words were leaving my lips I realized that I was showing myself to be only a petulant boy; but so much had been said regarding the power of this fur trader, that impatience and anger entirely overshadowed good sense.

"When you have had time to realize how completely you are in the power of Lisa, and why he will try to prevent you from returnin' even to Mackinaw you'll understand that a prudent man has good reason to be so far afraid as to keep a strict guard over all his words and actions," the old hunter said in a tone which conveyed reproof as plainly as the sharpest words could have done, and then he left the cabin abruptly.

Both Colin and Bob must have seen that I was ashamed of having spoken words which warranted Donald Stewart in reproving me, for they at once began to crow over the

ability to whip our number of pork-eaters, raising their voices so high that Simon Southard said warningly :

“He who waits until he is out of the woods before boastin’, stands a better show of bein’ the last to laugh.”

This remark dampened our spirits woefully, and we did not venture to speak again until the return of Jean Lafontine, and his announcement gave us good proof that the war had begun.

He came to tell me that he and all the crew, Mackinaws as well as Nor’westers, had decided to engage with the Southwest Company during the coming winter, and when I reproached him with having forgotten that he was a man of the north, who should be ashamed of associating with pork-eaters, he very promptly asked me how I would get him and his comrades back to the post.

“It will soon be arranged,” I said loftily, as if I had resources of which he was ignorant, whereupon he replied :

“You cannot get even a canoe, no matter how much ready money you may have in your pockets. That you will stay here is certain,

an' there is no reason why we should hunger with you when a good engagement is offered. It is better to be a pork-eater amid plenty, than a starvin' Nor'wester."

With this thrust delivered in a tone and with a gesture which told even more plainly than his words that he had cut loose entirely from my authority, the fellow gathered up the weapons belonging to himself and his comrades, and swung himself out of the cabin like one who delivers a challenge.

Colin and I gazed at each other in mute astonishment; Bob laughed heartily as if he saw something comical in this desertion of our crew, and Simon Southard said softly, as if talking to himself:

"Lisa's first blow, an' havin' begun he'll pound 'em in quickly."

Colin and I yet remained as if stupefied, when Donald Stewart entered, the expression on his face telling that he had succeeded in his purpose.

"Have you had good luck?" Bob asked, and the old hunter replied with a chuckle of satisfaction:

"Ay, that I have. The Spaniard will out-

fit me for a tradin' voyage, an' before it comes to an end you lads shall be among friends."

These words caused me to feel shame for myself; despite what I had said of a disagreeable nature to the old man, his first thought was to render a service to us who, save for himself, were friendless in a strange land.

"So he gives you credit for an outfit, eh?" Southard said with a smile. "At the same time he hires your crew, an' perhaps thinks that you won't be able to enlist any men."

"What do you mean?" and now Donald Stewart displayed more of fear than I had ever seen on his face.

It was Bob who told the story of Jean Lafontine's return, and when he was come to an end the old hunter asked, looking directly at Southard:

"What do you make of it?"

"I can't guess at what the old fox may have in his mind. If it doesn't run against his plans you'll be able to go north with the lads; but if he has any reason for keepin' you an' them here, here you'll stay, an' it looks to me as if he counted on holdin' you,

else why has he taken the trouble to buy off the voyageurs?"

By the time Southard ceased speaking I began to realize that I had underrated the strength of this Southwester, and there was no longer in my mind the idea that Donald Stewart might be a coward.

The old hunter remained as if buried in deep thought a long while, and then, glancing around as if thinking an enemy might be within ear-shot, he said slowly:

"I shall hurry forward the business upon which Lisa an' I agreed, an' then, if he stops me, will be time enough to try some other plan. If worst comes to worst, I may call upon you, Simon Southard, to provide me with a winter's outfit, trustin' to my ability to repay you in the spring, or that the Northwest Company will honor a draft which this lad makes on 'em," and Master Stewart pointed to me.

"I shall give you what is asked for, Donald Stewart, an' am satisfied with your promise to pay; but it is in my mind that you won't leave St. Louis until it suits Lisa's plans to have you go."

"Then there'll be such a scrimmage as you'll remember for quite a spell to come!" the old man said, and from that instant I believed I would never again question his courage.

"What about the swash-bucklers who warned you to leave within four an' twenty hours?" Master Southard asked.

"Lisa claims to know nothin' of the trouble; but insists that the man who made the row must have been from the new company's recruits."

"And Rose?" I asked. "Does he claim that villain is not one of his people?"

"That is exactly the case, lad. He says he an' Rose fell out last year, an' Hunt hired the man."

"That's not true!" Colin cried.

"It's the truth accordin' to Hunt's words. I was determined to know if the Spaniard was makin' game of me, an' went directly to the new factor. He admitted that Rose was in his employ; but claimed to know nothin' about what he might have done up the river."

"You can depend upon it that Rose did not enlist with the new company save at

Lisa's orders," Master Southard cried. "The men who made the attack upon you were all in the employ of the Sou'westers; that much I know for a certainty."

I was beginning to grow dizzy-headed; it seemed as if I had known something of what fur traders would do to injure a rival company, but these methods of the Spaniard's were beyond anything of which I had ever dreamed. Now I asked myself what reason Lisa could have for preventing Colin and me from returning to our posts, and, being unable to answer my own question, I put it to Master Southard plainly.

"That's what I can't tell you, lad. I'd count myself an able man if I could explain what is in the Spaniard's brain; but I'm thinkin' you'll know very shortly. You have been warned to leave St. Louis before to-morrow, an' in case you're here then we'll see if Lisa is willin' that those who are known to be his own men shall take a hand at drivin' you away."

"Then you think we're in for a fight, regardless of the promises made by Lisa to Master Stewart?"

"It looks that way, lad," our host replied, and the old hunter said with emphasis:

"We'll force the Spaniard to show his hand. Within an hour I shall call for a canoe or keel-boat to carry my outfit, an' if that is furnished without question, we'll begin to gather our cargo."

Having said this the old man went to the door as if to go out, and I asked:

"When shall we see you again?"

"If I have not come back within an hour you may take it for granted that it is necessary to look after yourselves," and I interpreted the words as meaning that if he failed to return at the time set it would be because the war was begun, with the first victory in favor of the man who stood at the head of the Southwest Company.

CHAPTER V

CAPTIVES

No one was more surprised than I when, at the end of an hour, the old hunter paddled down from the bend of the river in what was apparently a well-built canoe, and hauled her up on the bank near Southard's shop or inn, whichever you choose to term it.

I had quite made up my mind that when he presented himself to the head of the Southwest Company with the request for a boat, he would either be denied flatly, or put off with excuses made to veil a positive refusal.

"You wasn't expectin' quite so much as this, eh?" the old man said in a questioning tone as he saw to it that the canoe was properly cared for. "I'm free to confess it took me by surprise, an' it may be that I've had a wrong idea of Manuel Lisa."

"Did he treat you fairly?" Colin asked as we three lads ran down to inspect the new craft.

"He couldn't have done better had I been

his only friend. When I explained what was wanted, he told me to take my choice of boats, an' asked when I would be ready to choose the goods. I told him some of these hot-headed river-men were minded to make trouble, an' he thought I'd better get away as soon as possible, promisin' to do what he might in the way of preventin' any one from interferin' with us."

By this time Simon Southard had come up to have a look at the new canoe, and he said, replying to the old man's statement :

"That sounds odd, Donald."

"So it does, Simon ; but I'm givin' it to you with a straight tongue. If he meant anything that wasn't said, we'll soon know, for I'm goin' up to lay out the goods within the hour."

"And if we get away from here soon, we should be able to reach Mackinaw before the winter sets in !" Colin exclaimed in a tone of relief.

"Ay, that we should, lad, an' you can depend upon my movin' right lively until the outfittin' is done," the old man replied as, having disposed of the canoe to his satisfac-

tion, he set off once more in the direction of the company stores.

Now we were not at loss for something to talk about, and Simon Southard wagged his tongue as merrily as did either of us lads. We were yet speculating when Donald Stewart returned, and but one glance at his face was needed to show that he was well satisfied with the result of his day's work.

"Well, lads," he said in a tone of mild triumph as he seated himself on the ground by my side, "it begins to look as if we might get away within four an' twenty hours. I went over a list of the goods I would take, in company with Lisa, an' instead of cuttin' me down, he insisted that I needed more. I've laid out blankets, a few guns, plenty of ammunition, sugar, tea, knives, hatchets, and trinkets—enough, perhaps, to make up twelve packages."

"How were the prices?" Colin asked.

"Fair; I couldn't ask for anything better than the promises he makes. I was afraid he'd be suspicious of my not takin' more goods; but I allowed to be as keen for trappin' on my own account, as for tradin'.

When we came to the matter of food, I reckoned to myself that what might be enough to keep me all winter, would last the four of us into Mackinaw, unless the ice makes before we get there."

Then it was, when we could see no reason why it might not be possible for us to set off within a very short time, that we began to make plans for the voyage, and for the first time since the discovery of Sam Rose's treachery, my heart was light.

No one could have been more kind or generous than Simon Southard; he placed at our disposal everything he had which might be of benefit or comfort to us during the long journey, and when we questioned as to how we could send him the value of the goods, he declared that he was well content to wait until it was perfectly convenient for us to discharge the debt.

As to this last I did not waste much thought, for if it so chanced that Donald Stewart went with me to Fort William, I could give him, from the money already due me, the full amount of what might be owing to our host.

The old man decided that he would make no attempt to hire voyageurs for the journey. There was little hope he might be able to persuade any of the men to leave the post when the work of the year was about to begin, and we four could handle the canoe without great difficulty, although the labor would be heavy at the portages.

"Better strain ourselves a bit, than spend time trying to hire boatmen," Colin said decidedly. "I'm not burning to do any more work than is absolutely necessary; but to my mind the one thing important is to leave this post a goodly distance in our rear while Manuel Lisa is in the mood."

"The thing I'd like to know is, if he's really willin' for you lads to set out?" our host said slowly, and I looked at the old hunter, expecting him to answer what was in reality a question.

"I never spoke of you," Master Stewart replied. "He did not seem curious to know about my crew, an' I believed that the least said was the soonest mended. I'm supposed to be old enough to know who I want as helpers. We'll overhaul the craft to make

certain there are no weak points, an' at sunrise to-morrow I'll begin loadin'."

I had not believed it possible that we had so much work to perform before making ready for the voyage; but all the remainder of the day was spent in one task or another, and only when Southard's half-breed summoned us to supper had we come to an end of our labors.

From this source or that, we learned that Master Hunt could not be ready to leave St. Louis for some time to come. He no sooner hired a voyageur or hunter than some other of his crew would decide to give him the slip in favor of the Southwest Company, and the consequences were that, work as he might, but little progress was made.

"You can set it down as a fact that Manual Lisa counts on keepin' him here till it's too late to go up the river," Southard said in a tone of conviction.

"And then what?" I asked.

"No one save Lisa himself can answer that question. I haven't yet got over the surprise because he is willin' you lads should leave here to carry the news to Mackinaw."

The old hunter aroused us when the first

light of a new day could be seen in the eastern sky, and I was surprised because we had not been disturbed during the night. Before falling asleep I noted that our host and Donald Stewart each walked slowly around the cabin two or three times, as if fearing that those who had declared war against us might attempt to do mischief, and I wondered if the head of the Southwest Company had given orders that no attempt be made to molest us.

However, we did not waste many moments in speculation as to why our enemies had remained inactive; but at once set about making ready to begin the journey, for every hour was precious when winter might be so near at hand.

Donald Stewart and Southard paddled up to the company store, in order to take on board the goods the old man had selected, and within two hours they returned, having completed the loading.

It now only remained for us lads to take our places in the canoe, and we made no longer delay than was necessary to thank Simon Southard for the kindness and generosity he had displayed.

"Now that you're off, keep movin'," our host said in a low tone as he held to the gunwale of the craft lest we push off before he could say that which was in his mind. "Don't lay by a minute more than is absolutely necessary, for I can't yet believe that Lisa is really willin' the lads shall report at their posts all that has been seen an' heard here."

"You needn't fear we'll take any chances," the old hunter replied grimly, and then, as we took up the paddles, Southard shoved us clear of the bank.

"I reckon I've had all the fur hunting I want," Bob said in a tone of content as we straightened the canoe up into the current, and, heeding not the advantage to be gained by holding her in back water, paddled at a goodly distance from the shore, lest some of Lisa's rufflers take it into their heads to salute us with bullets.

"You're like to see something of the business before you go back to New York," Colin replied with a laugh. "If we're lucky enough to find open water all the way from here to Mackinaw, you can count with a consider-

able certainty on being shut in there till spring."

"Will Louis stay with us?" and the lad turned toward me.

"I'm counting on getting a team of dogs to carry me to Fort William," I said quickly, having decided upon my course if we succeeded in gaining the Montreal Company's post.

"And what am I to do?"

"Go with me, or stay in Mackinaw. I allow that Colin will look after you."

At that instant Donald Stewart interrupted the conversation to point out a canoe manned with Indians, which was creeping up-stream under partial cover of the western bank.

"Why are they settin' off so early in the season?" he asked suspiciously, and Colin replied cheerily:

"Perhaps for the same reason that has sent us off. Can you make out of what tribe they are?"

"Omahas, by the look of their feathers, an' it's certain they're not on a long journey, else there wouldn't be sich a show of finery."

Not until the old man thus spoke did I

realize that there was anything particularly odd in the appearance of the crew ahead, and then I gazed at the canoe in astonishment, for never before had I seen a party of savages on a journey bedecked as if for a council-fire or dance.

"They are only out to show themselves," Colin said carelessly. "I'm more interested in the Sou'west rufflers, just now, for I can't understand why, after havin' made so many threats, they are lettin' us off so easily."

Donald Stewart made no reply to this remark, and I could see that he gave all his attention to the craft in advance, as if he feared that something of mischief was afoot.

Colin, however, believing we were well away from Manuel Lisa and his pork-eaters, was in such high spirits that he must needs give vent to his joy and relief in song, and soon our paddles were keeping time to that song so familiar to us of the north :

" Long is it I have loved thee,
Thee shall I always love,
My dearest ;
Long is it I have loved thee,
Thee shall I always love."

Within an hour the Indians were lost to view in the distance, and with their disappearance the old man grew so light hearted as to join us in the voyageurs' song until a stranger would have said that never had a canoe been manned by a more happy, careless crew than ours.

It was hard work to paddle against the current hour after hour, for us who were unaccustomed to such work, but the old hunter was an expert steersman, and gave us the advantage of every eddy or bit of back water in the river.

At noon we hauled up alongside the bank, but only during the time while we were eating dinner, and then Donald Stewart insisted on my taking the helm while he worked at the paddles.

Before nightfall Bob Drexel could give us no little assistance, for he was an apt pupil, and, much to my surprise, showed that he was able to perform a full share of the labor.

When the sun was near to setting we pulled up at an inviting looking place for a camp, and I for one was well pleased because of the halt. My hands were blistered, and nearly

every joint in my body ached in protest against a continuance of the work, for never before had I toiled so long or so vigorously at the paddles.

We had made no more than twenty miles during the day, and yet counted it as fair work, since the sun was full four hours high when we left the post, and we had paddled against a strong current all the while.

"It's enough," the old man said as we were discussing the matter while making ready a supper of smoked pork and corn bread which Southard had put on board the canoe despite our protests. "So that we've left St. Louis an' Manuel Lisa behind, I am satisfied. If we've passed the mouth of the Illinois River by this time to-morrow, we'll lay over two or three days to get a supply of deer meat."

I was surprised to hear him speak of lingering when it was so necessary we should push on at our best pace lest we find ourselves cut off by the ice, and said as much, whereupon he replied, as if the matter was already well settled in his mind :

"We must take the chances, lad, for meat is needed."

"Didn't you get provisions enough for the voyage?" Colin asked in surprise.

"I didn't care to ask for what might be needed lest Lisa should understand that I was countin' on makin' a long journey, instead of only goin' up river till I struck a good show for trappin'."

"But surely we've enough here to see us through," I said, unwilling to spend precious time unless it should be absolutely necessary.

"Ay, if we can go through without delay; but in case the streams freeze while we are this side of the Wisconsin River, we'd stand a good show of starvin', an' we're not warranted in takin' sich risks. Better lie still three days than come to grief three weeks from now."

Half a dozen miles above the mouth of the Illinois River we came upon a tract of country that promised well for game, and there we remained until the morning of the third day, killing deer and curing the meat sufficiently to preserve it a short time, after which the frost would prevent it from spoiling.

During all this time we saw no man, either white or red, and had come to believe that the

only enemy in our path to Mackinaw might be the ice, for already did the winds bring us a strong breath of winter.

Both Colin and I chafed because of the delay; we were willing to take the chances of pushing on with no more in the way of provisions than would suffice for six weeks, or even less, but Donald Stewart, who more than once had had a battle with starvation, set his face stoutly against running any risk, and, as I have said, we believed it was his right to decide upon our course of action.

When we got under way once more, this time with the hope that no other protracted halt would be necessary, the day was bright, but the wind brought with it a promise of snow, and our leader said cheerily as he bent his broad back to the paddle:

"I'm allowin', lads, that it's a case of doin' our best from this on, even though it does seem as if all the chances were in our favor, an' I'll agree not to call for a halt so long as we can keep the canoe movin' against the current."

"We'll hold to the work as many hours as you can, if Colin will keep a song going,"

Bob said with a hearty laugh which, to me, had in it much of music.

We had pulled at our best speed an hour or more when, coming around a bend of the river, we saw in a small cove a tepee of buffalo skins, around which were lounging several Indians of the Omaha tribe, and I said in a whisper to Donald Stewart, who sat next to me :

“ I’m certain one of those fellows, if not all of them, were in the canoe that passed us the day we left St. Louis.”

“ It’s the same crew,” the old hunter replied confidently, “ an’ I’d give quite a bit to know why they have camped here.”

I had no fear that these Indians would attempt to work us mischief, first, because between the Sioux and the smallpox this tribe had been so reduced in numbers that weakness prevented them from interfering with white men, and, secondly, on account of their being such industrious gatherers of pelts that it was in their interest to stand well with the traders.

On seeing us one of the Omahas arose to his feet lazily, and by signs invited us to come ashore, while the remainder of the party ap-

peared wholly indifferent whether we accepted the invitation or not.

"Surely you're not counting on stopping here," Colin said in a whisper to the old hunter, as the latter ceased paddling. "If they go in for a powwow we may be held all day."

"True for you, lad, an' yet it strikes me that we'd better take the risk, seein's how they outnumber us," and Donald Stewart looked at me as if to ask my opinion.

"The Omahas are like squaws," I replied, "and may make it disagreeable for us if we pass them after the signal has been made. I'm not afraid of real trouble in case we keep on, but they might bother us a good bit 'twixt here and the Wisconsin River."

Colin made no further protest, and the canoe was swung inshore until her bow struck the bank near where the Indian was standing.

As if to show his friendly intent, the Omaha paid us the compliment of holding our craft while we leaped out, and once the boat was made fast Donald Stewart led the way toward the tepee, we lads following close at his heels.

I was surprised because the Indians showed so much pleasure at our coming. It would all have been plain had we met them in the wilderness when they had not seen a white hunter or trader for many months ; but these fellows had just come from a post, and could not be suffering for any necessities of life.

Master Stewart greeted them in Indian fashion as he seated himself near the tepee, and we copied his every movement.

I prided myself on being able to talk with nearly all the Indians who visited Fort William ; but here I could not speak the most simple sentence with any assurance of being understood. It is true I had seen Omahas at our post now and then ; but had never believed it would be to my advantage to study the language.

Donald Stewart, however, had been much with the tribe, and at once began an animated conversation with the leader of the party, translating now and then for our benefit, which enabled us lads to have a general idea of all that was said.

What troubled me not a little was the fact that the peace-pipe had not been brought out.

When a white man is among friendly Indians the most ordinary conversation is not begun until all hands have smoked in token of friendship during that visit at least, and I asked the old hunter if he could guess why this almost necessary formality was omitted.

"I can't tell you, lad," he replied. "It may be only forgetfulness, an' then again the red villains may have some scheme in mind which is not to our benefit. Keep your eyes open, an' see to it that none of the gang get between us and the canoe."

On landing we had left our weapons in the boat, therefore had with us nothing more formidable than the knives in our belts.

As we learned when Donald Stewart translated the conversation, the Omahas displayed considerable curiosity as to why so small a crew was going up the river at that season of the year. The old man explained that he counted on both trapping and trading, and, because he had brought only a small assortment of goods, could not afford to hire the usual number of men.

Then the Indians proposed that he winter at their villages, promising to sell him as many

pelts as he could buy, and our leader professed to be very grateful for the invitation; but claimed that he feared ill-luck might follow him if he retraced his steps, as would be necessary in order to gain the mouth of the Missouri River.

After this announcement the Indians repeated more urgently the invitation, and it could easily be seen by the expression on their faces that it was their purpose, for some reason best known to themselves, to force us into their way of thinking.

"Look sharp, lads!" Donald Stewart said as if translating something which had just been said. "These scoundrels are primed for mischief in case we refuse to do exactly as they wish, an' it ain't hard to guess why."

Like a flash of light came into my mind the solution to the riddle. These Indians, by having ascended the Mississippi instead of striking off into the Missouri, showed plainly that they had come thus far and encamped simply to intercept us. If we were willing to go to their village, we would be treated as friends; but in case the invitation was declined, they counted on using force, and all because Manuel Lisa

had hired them to prevent us from arriving at a Nor'west or Montreal post while the men of the Astor party remained at St. Louis.

The wily Spaniard did not wish to embroil himself with two strong companies, therefore, while seemingly doing all he could to aid us, had taken good care that we be stopped and held during such time as might pleasure him. It was a sharp trick, and we had been so stupid as never to suspect that he might be playing a double part.

"Let us make a rush for the canoe," I said in a low tone to Donald Stewart immediately the truth presented itself to me, and he replied cautiously, lest some of the Indians understood English :

"Don't move too quickly. While I am talkin' to the villains, Louis shall lounge off toward the river, an' if no move is made by the Omahas, Colin can follow. We are not strong enough to venture a battle."

Without looking at the redskins I knew full well that they understood something of what we had in mind, and before I could rise to my feet one of them, seizing his gun as if he had suddenly seen game, ran to the river bank

close by the canoe, where he stood peering here and there pretending to be eager on the scent.

Colin and I had had so much experience with such scoundrels that we were able to prevent the disappointment from showing in our faces; but Bob, who was growing more and more nervous each instant, gave vent to a little cry of surprise and fear, which was much the same as telling the Indians that they had interfered with our plans.

“Don’t move now!” the old man said in a whisper as he pretended to pick up something from the ground. “Watch out for a chance, an’ we may hit upon one soon if we keep our temper.”

Then Donald Stewart began to talk about the hunting near the village of the Omahas, and of a dozen other trifling things which caused me to chafe with impatience, for we were wasting valuable time.

The Indians made ready a stew, but whether of deer or dog I could not say, for the scoundrels had with them no less than four curs, and I knew they were fond of puppy broth, therefore my share of the feast was very small

until the old hunter fished up the shank-bone of a deer, after which I ate with better relish.

While the Indians were gorging themselves, and we lads were making a most hearty meal, I whispered to Donald Stewart :

"It is folly to spend any more time with these villains in the hope of being able to give them the slip. Let us finish the business at once, and we shall be no worse off after they have shown their will toward us."

This suited Colin, as could be seen when he nodded his head emphatically, and Master Stewart quickly made an end of his dinner.

Then he rose to his feet with the air of a man who has decided upon his course of action, and as he did so one of the Omahas went rapidly toward our canoe.

The old hunter explained, in a roundabout way after the Indian fashion, that he could not remain ashore any longer, however much pleasure it gave us, and, without waiting for a reply, walked to the river bank, we lads keeping close at his heels.

Then happened that which we had every reason to expect. The redskin near the canoe

leaped aboard the craft, sending her into mid-stream with a vigorous push, and every other member of the party seized his gun—weapons which had been purchased from the fur traders, and were not very accurate pieces, but sufficient at short range to work our undoing.

“What is the meaning of this?” Master Stewart asked sharply, speaking in the Sioux language that Colin and I might understand the words. “Why do my brothers steal our canoe, and suddenly show their guns?”

“It is but sport,” the leader of the Omahas replied gravely. “We are sad because you would go so soon.”

“Do my brothers know that in the boat are goods from Manuel Lisa’s storehouse, and that we must answer to him for them?”

I guessed by the Indian’s face that he knew even more about that trade with Lisa than did we; but instead of making answer to the question, he asked:

“Will my brother the trader come with me to the village of the Omahas?”

“Ay,” Master Stewart said quickly. “I will go, and take my goods with me; but these lads must push on up the river lest they get

caught in the ice, for their home is at the headquarters of the Nor'west Company."

It was evident that these red scoundrels of the Missouri had little fear of our men of the north, for the chief said as he stepped between us and the river bank :

"The young hunters as well as the old must go to my village ; but no harm will be done them ; they are my brothers."

"You count on reg'larly making prisoners of us, eh?" Master Stewart asked, and the scoundrelly redskin motioned for us to go toward the tepee.

Of a verity we had better have remained under Lisa's eye in St. Louis, than come into the wilderness to be held captives in some foul village by his orders.

CHAPTER VI

CHOUTEAU'S POST

IF any one believes that we showed a lack of spirit by submitting to the demands of the Omahas without even a show of resistance, let him give due heed to all the circumstances, after which it will be understood that we would have acted rashly by attempting to stand against Lisa's agents.

Because he had had no experience in Indian warfare, we could not count Bob Drexel as a portion of our fighting force, and thus we numbered three only, with no weapons save our knives. A battle with such odds against us would have been short indeed, and there could be no question as to the result.

In case we had turned sulky, showing any disposition for a fight, the Omahas could easily have abandoned us, taking with them our canoe and stores, in which event the chances were that we would starve to death in the wilderness, or be forced to return to St. Louis, and this last would have given

Manuel Lisa another opportunity to make outward show of being our friend while he was really our jailer.

As I summed up the situation during the few seconds when, in obedience with the silent command of the chief we walked slowly toward the tepee, our only course was to submit with the best possible grace to the inevitable, while awaiting an opportunity to give our captors the slip. There was no longer any hope that we would reach Mackinaw during this season, for a delay of more than a week must unquestionably settle that matter, therefore it was only acting the part of wisdom to make the best of an exceedingly bad bargain.

"Are we going to stay here just because these red rascals say the word?" Bob asked, as if surprised that we accepted the situation with apparent indifference.

"When the red rascals have all the weapons and the canoe, it looks to me as if they were our masters," Colin replied bitterly, and then we lads fell silent as the chief of the Omahas spoke at considerable length to Master Stewart.

"What does he say?" I asked when the savage had apparently come to an end, leaving the old man in a brown study.

"That his people are eager to see a trader before the trappin' season begins, an' we must go with him to Council Bluffs——"

"Council Bluffs!" I cried in dismay. "It is the same as saying that we must winter there, for it would be impossible to make the journey with all speed and get back here before the rivers are closed by ice!"

"Ay, lad, that is all they want. He agrees to treat us as brothers, an' let us go when the Astor Company's factor arrives there."

"Is Master Hunt counting on going that way?" Colin asked in surprise.

"So he says, an' if we wasn't certain before, we'd know now that Lisa had hired this gang to stop us. I'd be willin' to wager all the pelts I'll ever buy or take, that the Spaniard will follow the Americans, an' when he finds us on the river profess to be in a rage because the Omahas have done this thing."

Now that their rascally work had been performed, the Indians were not inclined to linger on the Mississippi any longer. All

our goods were taken aboard their own craft, and, this done, we were requested, as if we had any choice in the matter, to take our places in the canoe that the journey might be begun without further delay.

Bob's face brightened when he learned that we were to set off in our own craft, with no one to stand guard over us, for in his ignorance he believed it might be possible to give our captors the slip; but he soon came to understand how impossible that would be. We were commanded to lead the way, and, in event of our disobeying orders, it would be a simple matter for the Indians to shoot us off hand, or sink the boat, whichever might best suit their purpose. Then, again, it would have been the height of folly for us to make any attempt at running away when we had neither food nor the means of procuring any.

We plied the paddles in silence when this new journey was begun, with never a thought of raising our voices in song, and even Bob Drexel, who generally found something of pleasure in every situation, however disagreeable, was as near a fit of the sulks as a light-hearted lad well could be.

It was a full two hours before one of our party spoke, and all this while as we swept rapidly down the river, aided by the current, Donald Stewart appeared to be in a brown study, while I, thinking to hearten my comrades rather than expecting to hear anything hopeful, said in as cheery a tone as could be summoned when I was so near despair :

"Have you been studying over some plan to turn the tables on these villains? "

"There is little hope of our so far thwartin' Manuel Lisa as to reach Mackinaw this season," the old man replied, "an' yet, because you are lads, it may be that we need not go as far as Council Bluffs."

"Because we are lads!" Colin cried. "How can our age have anything to do with the wintering? "

"Did you ever hear of Auguste Chouteau? " Master Stewart asked abruptly.

"He's a member of the Southwest Company, and Lisa's partner," I replied.

"If by the Sou'west, you mean the St. Louis Missouri Fur Company, you've called the turn, lad."

"Well, what of him, and our great luck in

being lads instead of men?" Colin asked impatiently.

"Auguste Chouteau had shown himself of considerable importance in the fur trade before he had seen as many years as either of you," Master Stewart said gravely. "It is said that he was not yet thirteen years old when Pierre Laclede Liguist—old Laclede, as we call him—sent the boy to find a site for a tradin' post, an' this same thirteen-year-old lad picked out the spot where St. Louis now is. He was then Laclede's most trusted lieutenant, and is now as important a member of the St. Louis Company as Lisa. He's at Chouteau's Post, I reckon."

"Well?" I asked impatiently when Master Stewart ceased speaking, as if all his story had been told.

"That post ain't more'n half-way from the mouth of the Missouri to Council Bluffs," the old hunter said, as if thinking aloud, and Colin cried sharply:

"How does the distance affect us?"

"If we could turn back from there, it wouldn't be so bad as to spend the winter with the Omahas, an' I was thinking that, in-

asmuch as Auguste Chouteau had a good bit of hard experience while a lad, he might feel the more inclined to help you, even though it is his partner who's responsible for what has happened."

I really began to have hopes that we might yet succeed in reaching Mackinaw before winter set in, unless the Indians took it into their ugly heads to loiter on the journey. Many a time had I heard the story of Auguste Chouteau's connection with the fur trade before he was thirteen years of age, and it had always been said of him that he was an honest trader, at least, so far as concerned his dealings with white men.

Our people from the north had often declared that he could be trusted even with a trade secret, and it seemed reasonable to suppose he would aid us lads when he knew that we might be thrown out of employment because of having been careless, first to such a degree that the theft of our canoe became possible, and again, when we put confidence in what Manuel Lisa told Donald Stewart.

As may be supposed, we discussed this possibility eagerly, and before an hour had passed

Colin was singing the songs of the voyageurs, while we plied our paddles with such good will that the lazy Omahas were forced to exert themselves far more than was agreeable, or take the chances of losing sight of us.

This journey which we made as prisoners when our only fetters was the knowledge of what our captors could and would do if we made any effort at giving them the slip, was not unlike many another over the same course.

We ran down the Mississippi rapidly, thanks to the favoring current, and then came the struggle against the Missouri when we set our faces northward once more. One day was much the same as another. We paddled at our best pace, pretending not to hear when the Indians shouted for us to slacken speed, and more than once did we force them into an additional hour's work through our seeming deafness.

During the night we slept in the tepee, surrounded in such a manner by our captors that it would have been next to an impossibility to have gained the open air without raising an alarm, and, as an additional precaution against

escape, the canoes were kept on the opposite side of the river under charge of two Indians, or, where the stream was too wide to warrant so much extra labor at the paddles, the guard was increased.

No threats were made as to what might be done in case we tried to escape ; but the wary Omahas kept such strict watch over us that we were not allowed to stray a dozen yards from the tepee save in the company of an armed Indian.

It seemed fortunate for us that the scoundrels had no desire to prolong the journey, and, indeed, they had little cause, save from pure laziness, since the party partook of our provisions, eating with such zest and earnestness of purpose that it seemed as if they counted on crippling us by devouring all the stores.

On that day when Chouteau's Post was to be our next halting place, we lads sang merrily, so great was the hope in our hearts of there finding a friend, giving no heed to fatigue ; but set such a sharp pace that we arrived while yet the sun was two hours high.

Chouteau's Post was protected by a stockade

of timbers fourteen feet high, composed of logs averaging six inches in diameter, "squared" or hewn sufficiently to admit of setting them so closely together that there were no crevices through which an enemy might thrust a weapon. This stockade was nearly square, and perhaps two hundred and fifty feet long on each face. At the northwest and southeast corners were blockhouses rising six feet above the defense of logs, and in each were two small cannon, while inside the timbers, and within four feet of the top, was a narrow platform on which the sentinels could stand when doing duty, thus giving the defenders an opportunity of seeing the enemy in event of an attack.

On the north and south sides were huge gates which, when closed, formed a portion of the palisade, and on the easterly side were the stores. The commandant, or manager, of the post had his cabin under the wall on the north, and here also was one storehouse or shop. The easterly side was lined with four buildings which served as trading places, and along the south and west sides were the quarters of the employees.

Outside the main stockade, but fully pro-

tected by a palisade of logs, was an enclosure sixty feet square which passed as a garden, although I never saw produce enough taken from one to warrant the labor of enclosing it.

The establishment was located within fifty feet of the river bank, on an elevation which insured it from being flooded when the freshets came, as they did with greater or less regularity, and, save for the deadly monotony, a trading post is by no means a disagreeable place in which to spend a long winter, more particularly if there are plenty of hunters and Indians in the immediate vicinity.

During the last hour of our journey Master Stewart seemed to have recovered from the fit of melancholy which had held possession of him almost continuously from the time the Omahas declared their purpose of taking us with them, and when we finally stepped ashore, where were half a dozen of the people employed around the post who had come out of the stockade to learn who their visitors might be, he seemed literally brimming over with good humor.

I was really surprised to see the remarkable change in the man ; but did not then have an

opportunity of asking him the reason, because of being kept busy answering the questions of those who gave us hearty greeting.

I did, however, note the fact that our captors came up to the landing place with evident reluctance, as if in some way the situation had been changed in a manner which was not to their liking, and as I wondered what had caused this change it was suddenly explained, while I called myself hard names for having been so thick-headed.

When the Omahas paddled alongside the bank Master Stewart laid hold of the canoe, as he said in a threatening tone, speaking in English :

“Pass me the guns belongin’ to my party, an’ then unload our goods before leavin’ the boat.”

This command was obeyed on the instant, and then it was that I realized how stupid I had been.

They no longer dared to hold us prisoners after we had arrived at the post, and the only wonder was that they had been willing to halt.

“Well, if ever an idiot came into the wilder-

ness I am he!" Colin exclaimed in surprise and delight, the true situation dawning upon him only when it was plain to me. "But why did they let us stop here?"

"Because the villains didn't dare go by without givin' some notice," Master Stewart replied with a grin. "It was one thing to hold us up in the wilderness; but a different matter to run us by this place secretly, for it would have been the same as a declaration of war, an' these sneaks are not strong enough to play that kind of a game."

Then, while hurriedly explaining to M'sieur Chouteau's assistants how we chanced to be there, our canoe was drawn up under the stockade and the goods carried into the post, while we lads were literally wild with delight at having our trusty weapons once more.

The Omahas, who had lorded it over us so many days, looked anything rather than pleased with the sudden change in the situation, and yet they had already performed their task in a manner to please Manuel Lisa, since it was no longer possible we could make our way back to Mackinaw before the waterways were closed by ice. It was a case of wintering

in the wilderness as best we might, and our only course was to put on a pleasant face.

Donald Stewart claimed that all the party should go at once to the manager's quarters, as a matter of courtesy; but I held that since we lads really occupied no higher stations under him than voyageurs, it was proper he go alone and let M'sieur Chouteau say if he wished to see us.

As we had every reason to believe would be the case, the employees of the post gave us a hearty welcome, for traders in the wilderness seldom have an opportunity of greeting white visitors, and they were so eager to minister to our comfort that Bob whispered to me:

"Is it true that you no longer have any hope of seeing Mackinaw this season?"

"Ay, lad, we're shut in beyond a doubt, for winter is close upon us, as was shown last night when the ice made so rapidly."

"Then we're in luck, for this is a jolly place in which to spend idle time," he said in a tone of satisfaction, and I refrained from explaining that if we were taken in as guests during so many months it would be neces-

sary that we perform our full share of routine duty.

While we lads feasted on meat cut from the humps of buffalo and broiled on glowing coals, Master Stewart was closeted with Auguste Chouteau, and did not put in an appearance until our hunger had been fully appeased.

He refused to eat until after we lads had listened to his report, and we went with him across the enclosure to where our goods had been stacked.

"It is settled that we are at liberty to stay here until spring," the old man began when we were where our conversation could not be overheard, "an' this privilege M'sieur Chouteau grants as our right, because it is through Manuel Lisa that we are shut in durin' the winter——"

"Then he admits that the Spaniard hired the Omahas to make us prisoners?" Colin cried eagerly.

"Not so, lad; he neither makes a statement nor admits anything; but I could see that he was in no way surprised when I charged his partner with havin' done us this wrong.

Auguste Chouteau is an honest man, as every one in the wilderness will tell you ; but I'm thinkin' he believes Lisa was right in preventin' you from carryin' to Mackinaw word of what is bein' done here."

"Why?" I cried in surprise. "How can he be interested in what may be going on at St. Louis?"

"That I can't say, lad ; but it's certain the Sou'westers have some scheme on foot which has to do with the American Company, for M'sieur Chouteau told me he was expectin' Lisa here very soon."

"Then the quicker we leave the better!" Colin cried in something very like alarm. "We mustn't give him a chance to do us another ill turn."

"Where will you go?" the old man asked quietly. "Have you a desire to spend the winter in the woods when we can stay here an' do a bit of business on our own account? Besides, you'll find that Manuel Lisa, now his plan of preventin' us from goin' to Mackinaw has succeeded so well, will be our very good friend. The Spaniard can be amiable when he tries, an' may think he can win us over to

the service of the Sou'westers, if the quarters are made agreeable."

"It'll take more than good living to make me turn pork-eater!" Colin cried sharply, and Master Stewart said in a tone of caution:

"Keep all that to yourself, lad. We're only too glad of such good quarters as these appear to be. We're not here of our own will, therefore are we warranted in wearin' two faces if such be our pleasure."

With this remark the old man brought our private conference to a close as he went into the barracks for his supper, and we lads inspected the quarters assigned to us.

Although it was difficult for me to see in anything pertaining to Sou'westers the equal of what we men of the north enjoyed by favor of the Northwest Company, I was forced to admit that we were very comfortably lodged, having been given better than an ordinary visitor would have received at Fort William.

There was yet time before night had fully come for us to carry our belongings into the barracks, and by the time Master Stewart was ready to join us we were lounging in one corner of the building, with our goods and as

much of the provisions as remained, piled snugly around us.

"It looks mightily as if a new company had been formed," the old man said laughingly, as he seated himself on one of the bales and proceeded to make ready his pipe for smoking. And on the instant there came into my mind the thought that it was not impossible for us to make good his sportive words.

We were perforce in the wilderness, where we must remain until spring; already we had a certain amount of goods, and could readily purchase more if we had the pelts with which to pay for them. By hard work we might earn enough in this one season to give us a standing in a small way, and many a company had been started with no brighter prospects than ours.

As a matter of course, we would be encroaching upon Southwest territory; but it was owing to Lisa's perfidy that we were on the river, and surely we had the right to take advantage of our involuntary situation.

The idea so fascinated me, and the possibility of success seemed so good, that I could

not hold my peace, but must needs broach the subject to my comrades without delay.

Bob, who knew nothing whatsoever of business, cried out in delight, declaring that the venture must be made because there was no possibility of failure.

Colin looked up at me, asking with his eyes if I had suddenly taken leave of my senses; but Master Stewart began smoking furiously, and thus I knew that the proposition did not present itself to him as anything so very wild.

It was a full five minutes before the old man spoke, and we three lads waited in silence until he should give an opinion, I feeling mighty anxious meanwhile, for each instant the scheme grew in importance to me, and if he set himself against it there was an end of the whole matter.

"Considerin' all things, the idee looks mighty well," Master Stewart finally said, and the blood bounded in my veins till I was near to suffocation. "I can't see anything against it—meanin' of course anything that we won't be able to overcome by hard work. If M'sieur Chouteau will sell us goods

at a fair price, we should be able to turn ourselves two or three times 'twixt now an' spring. Of course there's always the chance that the bloomin' Injuns will turn rusty, when we stand a show of losin' all the pelts that have been gathered; but every trader in the wilderness is runnin' the same risk. Count me in, lads, if you want to play the game."

The expression of perplexity vanished from Colin's face, and Bob leaped to his feet excitedly, while I found it difficult to restrain my joy, for Donald Stewart had called a new company into existence. There was no good reason why we might not succeed, and three of our party knew full well what success in the fur-trading business meant to those who were at the head of the undertaking.

"I would rather have a good trading post than a gold mine," was the expression used when one spoke of the profits accruing from the business, and there was little wonder that Colin and I, whose salary of two hundred dollars per annum would not be increased for at least four years, immediately had golden dreams of the future.

"It's wisest to wait till the Astor factor an'

Lisa have been here before we make any decided move," Master Stewart said at length, and I fully agreed with him, for the Spaniard might not take kindly to the idea of our setting out in his territory as independent traders, while M'sieur Chouteau, because of his past, might look with a friendly eye, even though he might not come out openly in our favor, upon the attempt at bettering our condition.

It goes without saying that we discussed the matter privately at every convenient opportunity during the three days that followed while we remained idle at the post, and then came the word that drove from our minds even the thought that we might soon make ourselves rich in this world's goods.

There were at the post not less than a hundred and fifty Indians who had lately come in for purposes of trade, and when their bargaining was done they would expect a feast, as was the custom at such times. Then again, as M'sieur Chouteau put the matter to Donald Stewart, if the factor of the Astor Company with all his crew, and Manuel Lisa with the following which usually attended him, were soon to arrive, it was necessary the

supply of fresh meat be increased very materially. In no way could this be done save by a grand buffalo hunt, and the hunters of the post reported several large herds in the immediate vicinity.

Neither Colin nor I had ever taken part in such sport, and it had long been our one desire to do so, while as a matter of course Bob knew nothing whatever of the sport.

At such a time, when it is a question of getting meat rather than seeking enjoyment, every one at a post is expected to take part, and we lads spent no small amount of time furbishing up our weapons, for now was the opportunity to show what men of the north could do even when hunting game with which they were not familiar.

It was decided that the trading should be done during the next two days, and on the morning of the third we would set out toward the east, where it was believed the game would be found in abundance.

It really seemed as if Bob was more eager to see the trading than take part in the hunt, and although such business was an old story to us, Colin and I assured him that he should

witness all the details of the tedious task, to the end that when we owned a trading-post he might have a good idea of how to conduct this portion of it, for we had already decided that after we had accumulated sufficient capital to warrant our establishing quarters in the wilderness, the lad from New York should act as storekeeper.

The number of Indians who had come in to purchase the winter's supplies increased with each hour, and the only fear in my mind was lest we might have too many assistants to feed, for it was well known that one of these red-skinned rascals would eat more than he killed.

On the night before the trading was to begin, I believe there were not less than an hundred and fifty Omahas, Mandans, Pawnees and Otes outside the stockade, and then it was that the force within the walls were called upon for guard duty, irrespective of the position they occupied at the post.

The task of commandant, or manager, whichever you choose to call the man in charge of a stockade, was no mean one at such a time as this, for the lightest word or

most trifling act might provoke a quarrel which would not be stilled until after blood had been spilled, and it was not to a factor's advantage to have a fight on the eve of trading day.

All of us went on duty, the more reliable walking to and fro outside with seeming carelessness, and the others inside the stockade, every man heavily armed, and all under orders to bear much provocation without losing temper. Only when hostilities had actually been begun by the Indians was a gun to be discharged; but once it became necessary to fight, the command was that every bullet should find its billet.

CHAPTER VII

A DUEL

THE work of making ready for the trading had already been done; the Indians had met and smoked with M'sieur Chouteau in most solemn fashion; the chief men of the different bands had given due notice of the goods needed by their people, and a sufficient quantity of the desired articles had been brought from the storehouses to the apartment where the bargaining was to be done.

At Fort William, where the Indians were not so treacherous as in this section of the country, we did not take so many precautions against an attack, and the scene was new to me in many of its details.

In one of the storehouses was an apartment known as the "Indian room," and here the redskins gathered to await their turn for an interview with the clerks in charge of the trading, which last were in a second room connected with the first by a long, narrow passageway.

The doors giving entrance from the outer apartment, and into the trading-room, were of heavy planks, sliding on grooves, and so hung that they could only be opened or closed by those belonging to the fort, who manipulated them from the inside without exposing themselves to view.

In the lofts above the room, and at various points in the walls, were loop-holes where the employees of the post could see all that was going on among the visitors, and be ready to shoot down those who might be bent on mischief. As a matter of fact the Indians were watched as closely as if they had come bent on making trouble, and I said to myself that when our company built a post it should not be located among people who needed quite so much guarding to keep them in proper behavior.

The clerks who attended to the trading stood behind stoutly-barred windows, and, placed conveniently near at hand, guns and pistols were ready for immediate use. Two customers were admitted to the small inner room at the same time, and when they called for a certain article it was held up in front of

them, but behind the grating, which prevented any careful inspection. The rule here was the same as at any other post I ever saw, that each thing must be paid for before another could be shown, and thus it can be seen that when a visitor had a large number of pelts for sale, the bargaining consumed very much time.

Now it must be remembered that a fur trader buys at a certain price for each pelt, the amount being determined by the quality of the goods; but when he sells, it is by the pound, the basis of valuation in the first case being a beaver skin. If a customer buys at the post a pound of powder, he pays for it with two beaver, each of which will average to weigh two or two and a half pounds, and these last the trader reckons worth to him in the wilderness at least one dollar per pound. A cheap gun costs twenty beaver; a good blanket such as we know as "strouds," are worth ten skins; an axe, two, and a knife one skin.

As a matter of course the trader reckons that he must add to the value of furs in the wilderness, the cost of transportation to the place where he can sell them, and this is no

small sum, for in it he includes a certain amount to cover the loss of pelts during the journey, since it is reasonable to say he will lose a portion of his cargo, or even the whole of it, if the Indians suddenly start out on the war-path.

The trading was yet in progress, not more than thirty of the visitors having transacted their business, when an outcry from the river bank in front of the stockade caused me to run with all speed in that direction.

I arrived at a point where the river lay fair before me, just as what seemed like a large fleet came around the bend. There were three boats; the first, a large barge which I recognized as the one Master Hunt of the Astor Company had purchased in Mackinaw, and, following it, came a second barge. A big keel-boat, of the kind used on the Mississippi River, came last, and the three huge craft formed a most imposing sight.

The factor of the company which we had left behind at St. Louis had at last really set out on his long journey to the Pacific Ocean, and I ran with all speed to summon Colin and Bob.

The two lads were visiting the tepee of some Missouri Indians, trying to make a bargain for four skinny ponies; but they gave over the attempt immediately after I announced that Master Hunt was near at hand.

Together we ran to the river, where we sat watching the hunters, trappers, voyageurs and middlemen making ready for a halt, until a commotion among the newcomers, as they pointed down stream with no slight show of excitement, caused us to look in that direction, when we saw a gaily painted barge propelled by twenty oarsmen, and carrying, in addition to the bowsman and steersman, four passengers.

"Who can they be?" I asked in astonishment, knowing full well these last were not a portion of Master Hunt's party, because they carried the flag of the Southwest Company.

"It is Señor Manuel Lisa," a hunter, who was standing just behind me, replied, and I am quite certain that my face suddenly paled, for it seemed to me that the Spaniard had come on some errand which would work to our disadvantage.

"Is he traveling in company with the

Astor party?" Colin asked, much as if questioning himself.

"It looks mightily as if he was followin' 'em up," a familiar voice said, and, turning, I saw Donald Stewart.

"The Spaniard will keep a civil tongue in his head, I reckon, now that the Americans outnumber him three to one," Colin said, as if it gave him no slight satisfaction to know that Lisa was where he could not carry matters with as high a hand as at St. Louis.

"It doesn't stand to reason he'd make any attack on the new company's fleet; but yet if he wanted to give battle I reckon he'd get the best of it, even though his crew is so much smaller," Master Stewart said quietly. "Look in the bow of his barge!"

Then it was I saw that the Spaniard's boat carried a swivel at both bow and stern, which was more of an armament than I had ever before seen on a trader's craft, and again came the fear that there might be in his arrival a menace to us.

The word that Manuel Lisa was near at hand brought from the post every man not absolutely needed in the trading, and when

the bow of the barge struck the river bank a dozen pairs of hands were outstretched to make her fast.

I did not get a glimpse of the great fur trader as he stepped ashore, for even as the barge was being swung in that a hawser might be run out from the stern as well as the bow, I saw what appeared to be a scuffle among Master Hunt's trappers.

"They are fighting over there!" I said to Donald Stewart, and, after scrutinizing the men a few seconds, the old hunter replied:

"The trouble, if any comes, is all on Lisa's account. That man whom the others are tryin' to hold back, is Robert McLellan, a trader who claims that Lisa bribed the Sioux Injuns to destroy his post an' goods, an' drive him out of the country. He has threatened to shoot the Spaniard on sight, an' it looks as if his chance had come; but whether he's got the sand to do it is another matter."

At that moment a second man appeared from one of the American boats, and when his companions saw that he was armed with a gun, they threw themselves upon him also, striving to restrain him.

"The Astor Company seems bent on making things lively," Colin cried gleefully, and Bob crept nearer the water's edge that he might have a better view of what was going on.

"The other fellow is a half-breed—Pierre Dorion," Donald Stewart said quietly, as if he had been engaged as our guide to point out all the objects of interest in the vicinity. "He worked as interpreter for Lisa last year; but Hunt, of the new company, offered him bigger wages, an' he left the Sou'westers. I heard the story from Simon Southard when we were in St. Louis. Lisa tried to prevent him from goin' with the Americans, by threatenin' to sue him for debt, an' most likely the two had a bit of a scrimmage before he got away."

"It looks as if they might have a scrimmage now, at all events," Colin said, with a laugh. "There goes the Spaniard, hunting cover!"

It was really as Colin had said. Lisa had landed from his barge without having given particular heed to those whom he had been following, and was headed for the stockade when Pierre Dorion made his appearance.

Then it was that the Spaniard took to his heels, running with all speed for the shelter of his barge, and I believed he was showing the white feather, until Master Stewart said grimly :

“Manuel ain’t anybody’s coward, even though he is tricky. It’ll need more men to hold him than it does the other two.”

By this time both Dorion and McLellan had freed themselves from their companions, and, with guns ready for use, were advancing upon the Sou’westers’ barge as if stalking a deer.

Bob Drexel, in his eagerness, had approached so near the river bank that now he was almost directly in front of the two angry men, and however small had been his experience in such affairs, he understood that he was decidedly out of place.

I was on the point of warning him of his danger, in case a fight really took place, when he scampered off, running at a pace that would have done credit to a frightened deer, and calling forth peals of laughter from the bystanders, who had eyes for the comical even when it seemed certain a tragedy was to be enacted within a few seconds.

Manuel Lisa soon showed of what stuff he was made, for he had no more than gained the shelter of his barge than he reappeared, this time with a gun at his shoulder.

I was wondering why some of his people did not interfere to prevent bloodshed, when I saw a tiny puff of smoke from the muzzle of his gun, and then came the spiteful, crackling report which told of the flight of a bullet.

Some one shouted, and when I looked at Dorion and McLellan they were both erect, showing no signs of having been hurt.

"Did he miss?" I asked, and Master Stewart replied quietly :

"I reckon that's the way it'll have to be counted in the score ; but if the half-breed's shirt hasn't got a hole in the shoulder, I'll eat it."

Then came another report ; this time the interpreter had fired, but his missile must have gone wide of the mark, for Manuel Lisa was so far from being disabled that he had recharged his weapon and discharged it at the same instant when McLellan pulled the trigger.

Strange as it may seem, neither of the bullets did any damage, and then the short battle was at an end for the time being. A dozen or more of Master Hunt's company threw themselves upon the two men, disarming them after a brief struggle, and while this was being done some of the Spaniard's companions had pulled him down out of sight.

All this did not occupy four minutes of time, and yet that short interval had been sufficient to bring from the trading-rooms, the quarters, and the tepees every person within hearing of the weapons, and Indians and white men alike stood near about the boats expecting—perhaps hoping, that the battle would be renewed.

There was a moment, when every white spectator was wrought up to the highest pitch of excitement over what promised to be a duel, that the Indians might have taken possession of the post without striking a blow, and then indeed we all would have been at their mercy.

Dorion and McLellan had no more than been overpowered when Master Hunt ordered his people on board their boats, enforcing his

commands by a liberal display of pistols, and in a shorter space of time than now seems possible, the American Company was afloat, its fleet being carried down river by the current.

"I never took any great stock in that man Hunt, for he acted to me as if he had never seen the wilderness," Master Stewart said, while the Astor boats were drifting past the Sou'west barge even when its crew were struggling with the Spaniard; "but now I'm willin' to bet big dollars he'll do the work that has been laid out, or go under while tryin'!"

Not until then did I draw a long breath; it seemed as if my heart had ceased beating while the duel was in progress, and I was sensible of a great mental relief when the Astor fleet disappeared from view.

"Now what?" I asked of Donald Stewart, and he replied in a matter-of-fact tone:

"That's accordin' to who moves first. It ain't likely Lisa counts on stayin' at this post all winter, an' we're certain that Hunt must go up river if he reckons on gettin' across the country."

"Well?" I asked as the old man paused.

"Well, the first who makes a move will open the fight, or come to grief, an' I'm thinkin' that Lisa has found in Hunt a man who's got as much sand as he carries."

Now it was that the Spaniard appeared to realize he had other matters to heed than those which were purely personal, for he soon showed himself and gave a command to his voyageurs, and in a twinkling he and his twenty oarsmen were running toward the stockade at full speed, each man carrying a gun.

"He's come to understand that there are too many Injuns near about who may have been excited by what's been goin' on, an' allows it's time to look after the company's property."

I was no less eager than my companion to see all that might be done on this day, and together we went into the stockade, arriving there just as an order was given to close the gates. The trading was over for the day, and word passed for all hands to stand by in event of a sudden call to arms.

"They're getting frightened, eh?" Bob said with a fine tone of scorn, and Master Stewart replied :

"I don't call it fear, lad, but common prudence. If Manuel Lisa was one of the employees of this company, instead of chief owner, he'd been discharged off-hand for firin' a gun when there were so many of the red scoundrels around, an' now M'sieur Chouteau is only tryin' to guard against the Spaniard's folly."

A party of thirty men were sent out to bring in the cargo of the barge, and when that had been done word was sent the chief men of the different bands of Indians that if they kindled a council-fire that evening, the white sachems would attend.

This was only another way of promising that presents would be distributed because the trading had been broken off so abruptly, and none of us who were at all familiar with Indian ways were astonished when the answer came back that if the white sachems were willing, the fire should be lighted inside the stockade.

It was the same as saying that the wily redskins had no intention, even if they were able, of providing the feast which must follow the kindling of the council-fire, therefore they

would leave that honor to the white men, who would be forced to act as hosts in case the Indians visited the stockade.

"Why should they hold a council?" Bob asked of Master Stewart, and the latter replied with a laugh:

"Because it isn't anything of the kind. M'sieur Chouteau counts on ticklin' the Injuns up with a lot of presents, an' they've the same as told him that he'd have to throw in all they could eat. I reckon it would be better, so far as the supplies of the post are concerned, if Lisa had stayed away until after the buffalo hunt, for one of these red villains can eat a leetle more'n his weight in any kind of food you put before him."

"Are we to be cheated out of the hunt?" Bob asked in an injured tone, and I set his mind at rest by assuring him that after the powwow was over Master Chouteau would be in more need than ever of a fresh supply of meat.

There was really nothing that we of the new imaginary company could do after the gates of the stockade had been closed, therefore we gathered in our quarters to discuss once more

the prospects of business for a party who had no more of capital than was represented by the amount of credit which Lisa was willing to give us, and were deeply engaged in the problem when one of the clerks put his head in at the door and shouted :

“Señor Lisa wishes to see Donald Stewart an’ the Nor’wester he has in his company. He is in M’sieur Chouteau’s quarters.”

A thunderbolt from a clear sky could not have astonished us more than did this summons. While one might have counted twenty we sat gazing into each others’ faces, and although I cannot answer for the thoughts of my comrades, I know that there was no room in my mind for anything save the conviction that now was come the time when, deprived of the goods we brought with us from St. Louis, all hands would be ordered to leave the stockade forthwith.

“Is he going to tell us that we can’t stay here any longer?” Bob asked in a tone of fear, and Colin replied like the true lad that he was :

“In case he does we will go, after telling him a few wholesome truths. If that Span-

iard thinks we're going to truckle to him he's mightily mistaken!"

"Good for you, Colin!" I cried. "We can at least starve together, and that's what we will do rather than beg of a pork-eater!"

"It strikes me you lads had better wait till you're hurt before puttin' up too much of a yell," Master Stewart said quietly. "If Lisa wanted to do us a bad turn he wouldn't spend time jest now, when he's got plenty to take up his attention. Won't it be a good idee to find out what he wants before we fly off the handle?"

In a few minutes we were standing in front of the company's headquarters, where a voyageur paced to and fro as if acting the part of sentinel.

"You'll go in at once," the man said as we approached, and, grumbling in his beard because of this semblance of military airs, Master Stewart led the way into the building.

We found Manuel Lisa in what served as an office for the post, and with him was M'sieur Chouteau, whom I recognized at once from the many descriptions I had had of him.

No time was wasted in compliments. We were hardly more than inside the apartment than the Spaniard said sharply :

"Why are you here, instead of on the Mississippi, where you claimed it was your purpose to trade?"

I burned with the desire to answer that question after my own fashion, but soon learned that the old man was better at plain speaking than I would have been.

"If you had not hired the Omahas to stop us we would not now be here."

"What do you mean?" and the Spaniard roared, as if he would frighten us by the volume of noise.

"There is no need to bandy words, Señor Lisa," Donald Stewart said quietly but firmly. "The Injuns would have let out the secret if we hadn't guessed it."

"Were you really countin' on tradin' up river?" Lisa asked, speaking now in a more sensible tone.

"So that we brought back enough pelts, it makes no difference to you what we counted on doin'. It seems that you had it in mind I reckoned on takin' the lads back to their

posts, which didn't agree with your plans, therefore we're here."

"It seems that you've worked it out to suit your own ends, an' we need say no more about it. I gave you all that was wanted, an' now I'm askin' if you're ready to do me a service which shall be counted as part offset against your stores?"

"What do you want?" the old hunter asked curtly.

"The American Company has gone down stream. It may be the agent counts on winterin' near by, an' it's also possible he'll try to slip past, or take some other route. I want to know within four an' twenty hours what they're about."

"Meanin' that we're to play the spy on 'em?"

"There's no need of puttin' it that way. You've only to drift down stream an' pay 'em a visit. I can't well send any one from here, or take a man from my boat's crew, because of their bein' recognized."

"An' if we do it?" Master Stewart asked in the tone of one who would drive a bargain.

"Do what I want, an' you're free of the

post all winter, with as much time as you may need in which to pay for your outfit."

"I will do it; but as to which of the lads I take with me I'm to be the judge."

"Work the trick after your own fashion, so that it's done quickly," the Spaniard replied, and without ceremony Master Stewart turned on his heel and walked out of doors, I following close at his back.

When we were comparatively alone in the open air I asked the old man what he meant by intimating that he would decide which of us three lads he took with him, and he replied with a smile:

"Colin has such devotion to the men of the north that I do not dare leave him behind lest he plunge us all into trouble, and some one must remain to care for Bob, who is hardly more than an infant, therefore you will stay here, keepin' a sharp eye on all that happens, for Manuel Lisa's promise that we're free of the post for the winter doesn't prove that we have nothin' to fear from him."

It would have pleased me right well to go on a visit to the camp of the Americans, but I could not well make objection to Master

Stewart's plan, since he had had much experience in such matters, therefore I held my peace.

The old hunter was not one to chew over any plan, whether good or bad, and after deciding that he would play the spy for the benefit of the Spaniard, no time was wasted.

Instead of repeating to our comrades all that had been said during our short interview with the head of the Missouri Company, Master Stewart contented himself with announcing to Colin that he was to go down the river a short distance in his company, and then set about looking for a canoe which could readily be handled by two people.

"I reckon you two understand what's up; but it would suit me better if I knew why I must leave the post," Colin grumbled when the old man left us alone.

"He'll tell you the whole story," I replied with a laugh, for without being able to say why, I was now well content to remain behind, and the lad learned nothing from me.

The old hunter was ready to set off on the journey within five minutes after we came from the interview, and Colin was yet grum-

bling to me when Master Stewart called him to take his place in the canoe.

“ We should be back at this time to-morrow,” Donald Stewart said cheerily, as he took up the paddle, while I sheered the frail craft out into the current; “ but if it so happens that we’re delayed two, or even three days, don’t get it into your heads that we’ve come to any harm.”

CHAPTER VIII

TROUBLE WITH THE INDIANS

WHEN Bob and I went back to the stockade, after our comrades were lost to view in the distance, we found matters in a state of seeming confusion because of the preparations which were being made for the council.

The employees of the fort were making ready the feast, which promised to be of huge proportions. Eight of the Indians were setting up the council lodge, formed of large saplings set up at an angle in a circle with their tops interwoven, and yet sufficiently open to admit of the free passage of smoke. Around this framework were hung buffalo skins until all save the extreme upper portion was enclosed. The floor space was large enough to permit of at least thirty men sitting cross-legged, and, since only the chiefs of the different bands would take part in the council, there was ample accommodation for those entitled to admission.

Now that a stop had been temporarily put to the trading, the employees of the post were permitted to wander outside the stockade at will, and Bob and I roamed among the tepees, beginning our work as independent fur buyers by cultivating the acquaintance of the visitors.

When we returned to the stockade, shortly before sunset, the clerks were bringing out an assortment of the cheapest goods, which were to be given as presents, and stacking them up near the entrance to the council lodge where they might be got at conveniently. The cooks were busy over enormous pots of stewed meat, or frying molasses cakes by the hundreds, while the voyageurs ran here and there, borrowing or buying finery to be displayed during the evening, for our boatmen are not one whit behind the Indians in vanity.

We lads had no more than time to make certain our barracks were closed and fastened securely, lest we return from the feast to find that all our stock in trade had been stolen, when the guests began to assemble.

The gate on the north side of the stockade had been partially opened, and here were sta-

tioned four of the oldest hunters, whose duty it was to see that none of those who entered carried weapons.

Not more than one Indian out of every eight was entitled to a seat in the tepee, and these great personages strutted to and fro several times that all might admire them before they hid themselves and their magnificence from view.

Only when all of the Indians had arrived did Señor Lisa and M'sieur Chouteau put in an appearance, and I was not a little surprised to see that they wore gaudy uniforms, as if trying to outdo the redskins in the matter of finery.

When these two had entered the lodge and taken seats nearest where the fire was to be kindled, and where they could look out through the door, or flap, a medicine man, whose garments were bedecked with buffalo horns and snakes' heads dried and painted, came from the tepees outside the stockade bringing a bundle covered with beaver skins. Placing this in front of the oldest Indian, he slowly unwrapped it, disclosing to view a dozen or more dry sticks.

Bob and I were in good position to see all that took place, for we had approached as near the flap of the lodge as we dared, the Indians on the outside remaining a long distance off; but immediately after the medicine man made his appearance the spectators pressed forward until the doorway was completely filled up, and we lads were closely surrounded by the greasy, dirty crew.

While the medicine man was placing with great care and much ceremony the sticks in the hole around which the company were sitting, one of the chiefs was making ready the pipe which plays so important a part in all Indian ceremonies, and a second set about striking a spark from two flint stones into a tiny bit of tinder. Immediately a flame was produced, the council-fire and the pipe were lighted, after which the latter was handed to the oldest sachem. He gravely inhaled the smoke, then let out a puff upward, one down at the ground, and a third toward the east, when the man next him went through the same motions.

The pipe was passed from one to another until every person in the lodge had taken part

in the ceremonial, and by this time the fire was burning brightly. The council was opened, and all sat silent and motionless awaiting the movements of the white men, for since they acted as hosts, it was for them to make the first speech.

The Spaniard had provided himself with several strings of wampum made of fragments of shell, and, holding these in his hand that all might see they were white, which signifies peace and good will, he began an harangue in the Sioux language, not one word of which could I understand. Now and then he laid a twist of the wampum in front of the chief, and by this I knew he was making certain propositions, for at the council a single strand is given to represent each distinct portion of a speech.

It was dull work standing there watching the fat Spaniard without knowing what he said ; the Indians near us crowded most vigorously, and I longed for a whiff of pure air, therefore I motioned Bob to follow me where the odor was not quite so offensive.

Fires had been built at different points inside the stockade for purpose of illumina-

tion, and by the aid of the flames I could see armed sentinels standing at the gates, near the officers' quarters, or in front of the block-houses, thus showing that M'sieur Chouteau was on his guard against possible trouble.

Bob and I could see when the clerks carried the goods inside the lodge for distribution, and thus knew that the council was near an end, as did the guests, who began to gather at a central place in readiness for the feast.

Within an hour from the opening of the ceremonies word was given to serve the food, and then ensued such a scene as I dare venture to say cannot be witnessed anywhere outside an Indian village or trading-post. Braves and squaws did their best to show how much food could be devoured in a certain time, and a more repulsive scene of gluttony it would be difficult to find. It was nothing new to me, therefore I had no desire to witness it; but Bob was literally fascinated, and when I proposed that we go to our quarters, he insisted on waiting a while longer because of his curiosity to see how much food a very thin Indian near him could swallow without actually bursting.

The lad soon tired of such sport, however, having become convinced that the redskin could continue to gorge himself indefinitely, and we strolled over to the north side of the enclosure to see the voyageurs who were making merry in front of M'sieur Chouteau's quarters; but the sport at this place was not interesting, and we were about to go to our barracks for the purpose of lying down, when a shrill scream rang out on the night air, sounding high above all other noises.

It was the cry of one in mortal agony, and for a single instant I hesitated whether it would not be wiser to arm myself before seeking to learn what was the matter, when a second scream was heard, this time sounding as if he who had uttered it was beside himself with rage, and straightway I forgot everything save my curiosity.

At full speed Bob and I ran toward the council lodge; but we halted suddenly before we had covered half the distance, as we saw what appeared, in the dim light of the rapidly expiring fires, to be a dense mass of human beings struggling on the ground.

I had never been so unfortunate as to see a

fight to the death within a post; but it was not necessary for any one to tell me what was taking place. Undoubtedly a party of the younger Indians had started a quarrel among themselves, and at least one of the party had received a knife-thrust which insured his speedy journey to the Happy Hunting-grounds.

That blood had been spilled, no matter by whom, or why, was a menace to every white man at the post, and something more than brute strength was necessary to prevent a severe battle, if not a massacre.

The squaws at the first outcry had run toward the gate nearest their tepees, and, unfortunately, the hunters who should have guarded the exit, believing that nothing more than an ordinary quarrel was in progress, deserted their post with the belief that it would be possible, empty handed, to quell the disturbance.

The result was that before any of us had succeeded in learning exactly what had been done, at least a dozen braves, and nearly all the women, were outside the stockade, where they could get weapons in plenty.

The barracks in which our goods were stored was the only post I could think of at the moment, and toward that point I was hurrying when M'sieur Chouteau shouted :

“To your posts, lads, to your posts! Arm and take stations!”

If that command had been given a few moments sooner those who were outside seeking their weapons would have been within the stockade comparatively harmless; but the time had been lost, and when the employees hastened to obey they found themselves amid a throng of redskins who did what they might to prevent the white men from gathering at any one point.

Since neither Bob nor I had been assigned any station, we could do no better than continue toward the barracks, or so it seemed to me, and we had hardly more than unbarred the heavy door when eight or ten Indians, each carrying a gun, came whooping and yelling through the stockade gate.

I had often heard of traders being massacred by those who had come with peaceful intent to barter pelts, and for the moment I felt convinced that I was about to play a part in just

such a tragedy. Even as we darted inside the barracks, closing and barring the door behind us, I rejoiced because Colin and Master Stewart were not with us. They at least would escape, and I found no little satisfaction in the thought that all of our little party would not perish.

When we were in the apartment assigned to our use, and had barricaded the door with packages of goods in such a manner that it could not be forced without an expenditure of considerable time and labor, the thought came that we were playing a cowardly part in thus taking steps for our own safety, with no heed as to aiding those who might be in sore need of the little we might be able to do in the way of defense, and I said as much to Bob, whereupon he replied, as if having had much experience in such matters :

“Those belonging to the post know where their stations are at such a time, while we are outsiders, who might spend much valuable time trying to find a place in which to lend a hand, and I question if there be a spot where we can do more than here. The shutters have loop-holes in them, and if it comes to a regular fight we should be able to take quite a hand.”

As he spoke the lad set about loading his gun, and I understood for the second time that Bob could be depended upon to the full extent of his ability.

When my weapon was charged I opened one of the small shutters sufficiently to admit of my seeing what might be taking place in the immediate vicinity of our quarters, and then learned that we would be in the thick of it if a battle was to be fought.

M'sieur Chouteau stood but a short distance away, offering himself as an easy target if any of the red villains dared make an attack when none but their own people were responsible for the murder, and I am of the opinion that his bravery in thus showing himself had much to do with holding the Indians back.

A few yards behind him, and on either side, the painted scoundrels stood, the greater number of them having been supplied by this time with weapons, and it surely looked as if they would spring upon him at any moment.

Not another white man could be seen within the stockade, although I knew full well that behind the walls of every building were the clerks, hunters and voyageurs ready to shoot

with good aim when the first blow had been struck. They could avenge the murder of the commandant; but would be powerless to prevent it.

“Take good aim at those fellows directly behind M’sieur Chouteau, and be ready to pull the trigger before they can strike a blow,” I said in a low tone to Bob, wondering meanwhile that the chief man of the company should thus tempt fate, for it was little else when he stood unarmed in the midst of those scowling savages, whose greatest delight was in the shedding of human blood.

Had M’sieur Chouteau been among his most intimate friends he could not have appeared more at ease than when he stood facing the feather-bedecked wolves, holding them at a distance simply by his heedlessness of danger. There he remained, looking searchingly around as if taking a mental picture of every brave in the stockade, until fully five minutes had passed, and then he said, speaking slowly in English :

“What has troubled those who are here to feast? Why have they sent for their guns when it was agreed that all who came to the

kindling of the council-fire should have empty hands? Why did one of your people murder his friend when we had but just finished smoking the pipe of peace? Where is the murderer? If your tongues are not double, and your hearts beat in friendship for the white traders, as you have said, why do you not seize him who shed his brother's blood? Are you waiting for me to show you the man who deserves a speedy death in punishment for his crime? There he is!" and M'sieur Chouteau, wheeling about suddenly, pointed to a villainous looking Indian who had been standing directly behind him, the same fellow at whom my gun was leveled.

The redskins seemed bewildered by this flood of questions, and the fellow who had committed the murder, and was doubtless hoping that his crime would be lost sight of if a fight ensued, glanced here and there quickly as if seeking some way of escape.

"There stands the man who has started this trouble!" M'sieur Chouteau cried in a thunderous note. "Will you let him kill one of his own people and then cover it up by bringing you into a quarrel with the white

men, who can speedily wipe you out? Seize him, and see to it that he pays for the life he has taken ! ”

At that moment the murderer made the fatal mistake of trying to escape, starting at full speed toward the gate ; but a dozen pairs of hands, which by this time might have been reddened with blood, were outstretched to stop him, and the fellow fought vainly until he was overpowered.

“ Take him away ! ” M’sieur Chouteau cried when the redskin had been rendered helpless. “ See to it you show your people and mine that a man may not kill his brother at a council feast and live to boast of the deed. ”

M’sieur Chouteau stood like a statue until the murderer had been dragged through the gate, and then he went over to where the victim lay, remaining near the dead man until three or four of his tribe carried him away.

Those who bore the body began a song of lamentation as they lifted it from the ground, and every redskin within the stockade joined in the weird song as they followed the little procession.

No more than ten minutes could have elapsed from the time the cowardly blow was struck until every brave and squaw were outside the limits of the fort, and not until then did the officer give the command to bar the gates.

Then it was that the employees showed themselves once more; but Manuel Lisa kept under cover, as well he might, for he had not played a very heroic part, according to my way of thinking.

Outside the Indians were wailing at the full strength of their lungs, and no one could say when their chant of grief might be changed into a war-song.

"I reckon this little scrimmage puts an end to the buffalo hunt," Bob said in a tone of regret as we began removing the barricade from the door.

"As to that I'm not so certain, my lad. After giving the feast it stands to reason that the supply of food in the post isn't over large, and plenty of meat will be needed 'twixt now and next spring."

"I'd hate to miss the chance of seeing one," Bob said reflectively. "In the first place I

want to know how it's done, and then again, I'm aching to try my hand at big game."

"You'll have all the chance at that kind of sport that the most greedy lad could ask for," I replied with a laugh. "There's no question but that we'll stay in the wilderness till spring, and if we push out on a trading trip there'll be many a time when it'll be necessary to kill or be killed."

"I'm not looking for those chances, Louis," the lad said with so grave an air that I could not restrain my mirth. "What I most want is something that's safe—I don't hanker after running my nose into danger."

"And yet you stood ready and willing to do your part, when it seemed certain we had a battle with the redskins on hand."

"Oh, that was a case of must. You know a rat will fight when he's cornered, and it's much the same way with me."

M'sieur Chouteau himself saw to the stationing of the sentinels, and also sent a squad of men to guard the barge, after which the word was passed for all hands to turn in ready for action at the first summons.

Bob and I lay down in our small barracks

with a sense of most perfect security, although the howling of the painted scoundrels sounded shrill and threatening, and within a very short time I lost myself in slumber, not to be again conscious of my surroundings until another day had dawned.

The Indians appeared to be quiet, perhaps because of having exhausted themselves in mourning during the night, and the sentinels reported that the murderer had expiated his crime by giving to the family of his victim six ponies and twenty beaver skins.

M'sieur Chouteau had announced that the trading would be resumed at noon, and once more the clerks and employees made ready for the task, this time taking even greater precautions than before, and only three Indians were to be admitted inside the stockade at a time.

The day was not more than two hours old when Master Stewart and Colin returned from spying upon the American party, and, without asking any questions, we knew that Master Hunt had encamped very near the post; but none of us believed he would remain close at hand during the winter until our comrades told the story.

As a matter of course they first reported at headquarters, where Manuel Lisa and M'sieur Chouteau listened to them, and when the result of their spying had been made known, the commandant promised, in the name of himself and his partners, that we should be free of the stockade so long as pleased us, while we were at liberty to trade wheresoever we pleased.

According to my way of thinking, it was a goodly price to pay for such service as we had rendered ; but whether M'sieur Chouteau or we got the best end of the bargain, it was certain that we were now in a fair way to make a success of the new company.

"We couldn't have asked for anything better," the old hunter said when we four were alone in the barracks. "If we fail to make a stout capital for ourselves this season, it will be because of our own foolishness, an' not owin' to the fact that we didn't have the best kind of a show."

Then our comrades explained that the Astor Company had halted within ten miles of the post, and had already begun work on a winter camp. Colin and Master Stewart had remained with the party during the night, and

on leaving had been most cordially invited to come often, in case we remained in that vicinity until spring.

“If the people of this post don’t quarrel with Master Hunt’s company, it will be pleasant to have neighbors so near,” Master Stewart said in a tone of satisfaction, “and we should be able to get, with two places to draw from, all the goods we may need.”

CHAPTER IX

A BUFFALO HUNT

WE who counted on forming a new company felt very comfortable in mind when the employees of the post were ready for trading once more. It appeared to us as if matters were shaping themselves in such a manner as must be to our advantage, and already had we in our hearts forgiven Manuel Lisa for having forced us to spend the winter in the wilderness, because unless he had done so, we would not be standing at the beginning of the road to fortune.

We saw nothing of Lisa during the remainder of the day, and I believed it was a good idea for him to keep out of sight, for surely it seemed as if trouble followed wherever he showed himself. The Indians behaved properly while trading; it was as if the murder had been sufficient to satisfy their thirst for blood, and they were content to walk straight until a more convenient opportunity.

I never knew a fur trader who would trust an Indian any more than was absolutely necessary, and he who kept the best hold on his hair was that man who remained ever on the alert, ready to shoot first and ask for explanations afterward. On this day, however, a party of children could not have been more peaceful, and I attributed their lamb-like manner to the desire for a grand hunt, which would, as the redskins knew full well, be followed by a prolonged feast.

The number of pelts that were brought in would have satisfied the most greedy trader, and, roughly figuring it, I estimated that if the St. Louis Company succeeded in getting to a market the furs bought that day, they would have a clear profit of five thousand dollars.

"Wait till we have our chance at this kind of business," Colin exclaimed when I had guessed at the value of the trading. "If we have good fortune this winter, we should be able to build a post of our own in another twelve months, and then the Independent Company will be gathering in the dollars."

"Or losin' its hair," Master Stewart said

grimly, as he sauntered across the enclosure to make certain our canoe had not been disturbed.

Not until another full day passed did the trading come to an end, and then I was not the only one within the stockade who felt a bit uneasy because of what the Indians had demanded in exchange for the pelts. As a rule these red hunters call for blankets, beads and useless trinkets, buying no more ammunition and weapons than is absolutely necessary for ordinary use during the remainder of the season; but on this occasion guns, knives, powder and bullets made up the bulk of the purchases, and never a brave did I see who was not laden with an unusual supply of war-like implements and material.

It is quite certain that at Fort William the visitors would have been refused, when they asked for such goods, the plea being that it was not convenient to supply them; but M'sieur Chouteau's clerks dealt out everything called for.

On the evening when the trading was brought to a close five or six Indians, together with eight hunters from the post, set out to

prepare for the long-promised hunt, their task being to find the herds, and, if possible, drive them toward such places as had been selected for the hunting ground. I had never seen buffalos killed, and was much surprised at learning that it would be a comparatively simple matter to drive the huge brutes in any desired direction, provided they had not been lately stampeded.

On this night we discussed our fur-trading scheme, and decided upon a course of action as soon as the hunt should come to an end, and as soon as we had a supply of provisions. Colin and I believed we were capable of trading when once customers had been collected; but we were all at sea regarding the methods of inducing the Indians to bring in their pelts for our benefit.

Next morning the scene in and around the stockade was one well calculated to stir a fellow's blood, if he had in him any instincts of the hunter.

The ponies belonging to the post were being brought from the garden corral, plunging, kicking and squealing. The pack animals were biting and bucking as the loads, made

up of skins for the tepees, provisions and extra ammunition, were lashed in place, while men ran here and there eagerly until one could but liken them to a swarm of bees making ready to seek a new hive.

Outside the stockade a wilder picture was presented. The greater number of the lodges had been stripped of their skin coverings, leaving the bare poles standing like skeletons; squaws were gathering up the belongings of their masters and packing the goods on the lodge poles, which were lashed to the sides of the ponies with the ends trailing on the ground behind, while seated around the several fires were the chiefs and braves, each holding the trail-rope of his favorite steed, but making no show of performing any portion of the labor.

Then it was that Bob learned how quickly Indian women can get their household goods in readiness for transportation, even when their masters persist in hampering the movements by squatting with their ponies in the thick of the workers. The sun was not yet an hour high when we rode out of the stockade, a goodly company, the young redskins

dashing on in advance, the white men riding sedately in close order, the older Indians straggling along indolently, and the squaws with the laden ponies bringing up the rear.

Only ten men had been left to guard the post, and among them were M'sieur Chouteau and Manuel Lisa. Our company numbered a full two hundred, and stretched out in line of march for nearly a mile.

Lest any one should wonder how it chanced that we of the company which was yet to be formed had provided ourselves with horses, I will say that one of the clerks brought us word the evening previous that we were free to use any of the ponies belonging to the post, and we knew, without asking questions, that this favor was shown because of what Master Stewart and Colin had done in the way of spying upon the Astor people.

Until late in the afternoon we advanced without other halt than to give ponies and riders water, and then we saw on the sides of the hills in front of us three of the scouts who had been sent out in advance from the stockade.

These men were waving their blankets as a signal, and Master Stewart explained that buffalos were near at hand.

"We shall camp here, an' look after the game in the mornin'," the old man said as confidently as if he had heard the order given, and Bob, eager to understand all he might regarding the hunting, asked how all this was known.

"The scouts have told us, by wavin' their blankets up an' down, that we're to come no further. If they had stood on the tops of the hills, it would have shown that the beasts were so far away they would not take alarm. We may as well pull up here; a better place for a camp couldn't be found, although we'd be in a bad hole in case of an attack, an' it won't be many minutes before the tired squaws, who have run behind the pack-ponies all day, will be settin' the lodges for their lazy husbands."

It was as Master Stewart had said. Almost before he had ceased speaking the hunter in command of the white party rode forward to give orders where our camps should be set, and the Indian leaders staked out their en-

campment by putting up small poles, over which were thrown blankets.

The work of settling down for the night was no more than well begun when the scouts on the hills signaled by waving the blankets in a circle above their heads, and on the instant every brave and hunter who had already dismounted sprang toward his horse, while those in the saddle leaped down to tighten girths and remove such baggage as had been brought on the back of the steeds.

"Make ready, lads, an' move lively if you want to be in at the death!" Master Stewart cried as he began loading his gun. "The scouts have told us that there's a herd near at hand which can be tackled without much chance of stampedin' such others as may be hereabouts, an' you're like to see a feast this night that will put in the shade anything you've ever witnessed in the eatin' line."

The Indians were casting off everything they wore save waist-belts and moccasins, and calling to the squaws for their bows and arrows, a matter which puzzled me not a little, because every redskin over ten years of age was armed with a gun, until Master

Stewart explained that they could do more execution with such weapons when in the midst of a herd. A brave can ride alongside the beast he has marked out for his own, and shoot arrows into him without noise or smoke, therefore, while doing quite as effective work as with powder and ball, he does not run the chance of stampeding the entire herd.

Although we lads made all possible haste, nearly every Indian in the company was off at full speed, riding without saddle or bridle, and guiding his pony by a cord of twisted hair, before we were in shape to send our tired steeds on a long race.

Of that which happened during the next hour I have no very clear idea, save concerning my own movements. We rode at full speed until having arrived on the hillside where the scouts were stationed, and there we remained five minutes or more, when the word was given, and over the rise we dashed toward where was a small herd, numbering perhaps three hundred cows, feeding peacefully hardly more than two miles away.

"The redskins will drive 'em onto us," Master Stewart shouted as he partially

checked the speed of his pony. "We'll take the herd as it comes along. Pick out your beast, an' then ride close alongside of him while he keeps goin' straight ahead; but have your eyes open in case he turns to charge. Plug the lead into the carcass till he shows blood at the nose, an' then go for another."

Some of the Indians had circled around the herd in order to drive it toward the encampment, and we who were pursuing divided into two parties, one going to the right and the other to the left.

I had quite as much as I could do to keep my pony in place while we were riding obliquely to the right, and once we were within range of the game it was the plucky little steed who took command. He carried me alongside one of the cows, and I fired at her shoulder; but, not being accustomed to shooting from the saddle, the bullet did not strike a fatal spot, and side by side we galloped, the pony and the cow, with me an involuntary third, until I managed to reload my gun.

Two more bullets I sent into the huge

beast before she wheeled suddenly, my pony jumping aside so quickly that I was near to losing my seat in the saddle, and then I saw the blood oozing from her nose as she came to a standstill.

Now it was that I could see dark spots on the plain, each of which I knew represented the carcass of a buffalo, and here and there stood wounded beasts, their sides bristling with arrows, while far away in the distance the work of slaughter was going on.

The signal to cease killing had been given before my pony succeeded in overtaking the game again, and I pulled up the little fellow to wait for my comrades, whom I knew must come back that way, wherever they might be, in order to regain the encampment.

Not more than half an hour was spent in the work, and yet, as we learned later, twenty-six buffalos had been killed. But for fear of frightening the herds which the scouts reported as being only a few miles away, I dare venture to say our company could have slaughtered a full half of the cows we had been chasing, for of all stupid animals they appeared to me to be the worst.

The game was brought into camp by some of our packers and the squaws, and when it arrived every preparation had been made to receive it in proper Indian fashion. Twenty or more fires were built, around each of which a small party of whites or redskins were seated, and the huge carcasses, being flung where they could be most conveniently handled, were speedily cut into slices or chunks for roasting or broiling.

The feast came to an end only when it was literally impossible for any one to eat more, and then I believe no less than six entire carcasses had been devoured. We of the new company laid down in one of the lodges while the orgy was at its height, and at an early hour next morning we were awakened by the call for hunters.

Bob Drexel frankly confessed that he could not ride and shoot at the same time, therefore he preferred to remain in camp, and I felt it my duty to stay with the little fellow lest he might get into trouble if we left him alone.

Master Stewart and Colin rode away side by side, and I envied them the pleasure they would have, for, excepting the excitement of

running a rapid in a strange river, I know of no sport so thrilling as the pursuit of a buffalo herd while astride an intelligent pony.

One full week was spent at this place, and then we had as much meat as could be carried back to the post, while the Indians were given a goodly share ; but not as much as seemed to me just, since their women had performed all the labor.

The last day in camp was to be spent in an antelope hunt by the Indians, in order that a supply of fresh meat might be had for the journey to their village, and while the white men were not invited to join in the sport, it was understood that their assistance would be agreeable.

Then it was that Bob Drexel surprised me by saying in a matter-of-fact tone, as if he was the most ardent hunter in the encampment :

“ You and I had better go out with the crowd, Louis. It has been dull work hanging around here watching meat and squaws.”

“ If you can’t shoot from the saddle at a buffalo, I don’t see how you’re going to distinguish yourself chasing antelope,” Colin said with a laugh.

"I'm not so certain that I won't be able to do a bit in that line," Bob replied with a laugh. "I've been taking a few lessons by myself, and believe it's only a trick."

Therefore it was that when the sun rose next morning Bob and I were in the saddle, surrounded by half a hundred Indians, and the only whites in the company; but that was a matter which gave me very little concern, for after having been with the redskins so long, and on such apparent terms of friendship, there was no reason to mistrust them.

We rode at full speed, and I fully expected the younger Indians would join in the sport; but much to my surprise they hung back in the rear, and none save the elders rode near us. The ponies enjoyed the race quite as much as did we, and not until we were a good ten miles from the encampment was the speed slackened. Then only three of the Indians could be seen, and they hung so close at our heels that I fancied it was their purpose to learn what wind our steeds had, in order to know if it would be well to make a trade.

"Game over there?" I asked in the lan-

guage of the northern Indians, as I pointed straight ahead, and the eldest of the party replied readily :

“Over there. Two hours' more ride.”

“Two hours more!” Bob cried in dismay. “I thought we were going only a few miles from camp!”

That idea was also in my mind, and I looked around anxiously for the remainder of the party, but failed to see any signs of life in the rear.

Then it seemed to me that the Indians rode more closely, as if to push our ponies on yet further ; but because there was a smack of cowardice in giving words to thoughts which were almost fears, I remained silent.

We sent the ponies ahead at a leisurely pace ; but when another hour had passed there was no show of game, and I became convinced that the three redskins who rode so close behind us were trying to force the pace.

“There's no use in keeping on any further,” Bob finally said as he reined in his steed, and then it was that I saw the nearest redskin give the pony a sharp cut with his whip of rawhide.

As a matter of course the little animal bounded forward, and before Bob could quiet him down we had increased our distance from the encampment by at least three miles.

If Colin had been with me, I would have said that which came into my mind when the trick was played; but I feared to alarm Bob when it was possible I might be making an old woman of myself, and held my peace until the lad said petulantly:

"Look here, Louis, there's no sense in riding so far away when we only came out for a little meat. Suppose we leave the Indians to find antelopes, while we go back to camp? I'm not so eager to try my skill as a hunter."

He pulled his pony to a standstill while speaking, and the redskins rode their horses onto our heels, urging them forward even at the risk of mixing us up in a kicking match.

"Hold back there!" I cried sharply. "We're not minded to go any further; but we won't stand in the way of your sport. Go on without us."

Then it was that I understood we were in for mischief; but why we two lads were to suffer from it I could not make out. During

a minute or two the Indians continued to force their ponies against ours, and when I tried to pull aside, thereby giving them a chance to pass, the eldest of the three, a villainous looking old fellow whom I believed had been concerned in the murder, said in a tone of command :

“The white boys will ride to the poor Indian’s village.”

“Why?” I asked, trying stoutly to prevent any tone of fear from being apparent in my voice.

“My people want to see them. We are brothers.”

“Not much we ain’t!” Bob cried shrilly. “I’m not going to any of your villages!”

Then the slight semblance of a friendly cloak was cast aside as the three braves leveled their guns full at us, and I knew we had no show of escape, although why we had been made prisoners puzzled me so much that I almost forgot to be frightened.

CHAPTER X

PRISONERS

DURING the few seconds while Bob and I sat motionless, looking down into the barrels of the guns, when there could be no doubt but that we had absolutely been made prisoners, the question came as to where we might be carried, for, as a matter of course, the one thought in my mind was of escaping at some future time, if not immediately.

These three villains who had taken advantage of the antelope hunt to carry out a plan which they must have had concocted for some days, were Missouris, as I knew by being able to make myself understood in their language. Now when we started from Chouteau's Post for the grand hunt we had ridden directly north, passing between Little Platte River and that series of creeks which make down into Grand River. If the Missouris counted on taking us to their village, we had four or five waterways to cross before coming to the Mis-

souri River, and ought to bear off sharply to the westward, for, as I figured it, we were not more than fifty miles east of our captors' principal settlement.

There was in my mind, for the merest fraction of time, a question as to whether this might not be some move of Manuel Lisa's; but I dismissed it instantly, for now that the winter was so near at hand the wily Spaniard knew full well there was no possibility of our gaining Mackinaw, to say nothing of Fort William.

All this, as I say, came into my mind like a flash, and surely no more than half a minute had passed from the time the redskins showed their true colors, before I asked with so much of stout-heartedness as it was possible to assume :

"Why have our brothers done this thing? Have they dug up the hatchet against those with whom they have been hunting these many days?"

"Set your ponies' heads northward, and ride," the eldest of the three scoundrels said in a tone of command, striking my pony with his whip of raw-hide, and as the little steed

bounded forward Bob spurred on that we might ride leg to leg, as he asked in a voice tremulous with fear and excitement :

“What will they do with us, Louis?”

“That is a question which it would please me much if I could answer, Bob.”

“But they have been friendly until this minute.”

“Ay; but that has no bearing whatsoever where an Indian is concerned. His most pleasant smile may conceal a frown of deadliest hate. Do you remember that they bought more of weapons and ammunition at the post than anything else?”

“Yes; you and Master Stewart spoke of it at the time.”

“Well, it may be that they were making ready for an outbreak against the traders, and this is but the beginning of it?” I replied, striving most earnestly to come at a solution of the problem which would satisfy myself.

“And why should they take us prisoners? We are but two lads who have nothing of value about us,” Bob persisted.

“We have our ponies and guns.”

“But the whole outfit isn’t of enough value

to warrant their doing what might cost them dearly."

"I cannot say much as to the cost. Save for Master Stewart and Colin, who would trouble their heads about us, when it was a question of driving away those who might bring pelts for barter? Surely not M'sieur Chouteau or Manuel Lisa."

Bob fell silent for a moment, and then asked angrily, his courage rising in proportion to the danger :

"Are we to ride on, as these villains insist?"

"How can we do anything else?"

"Turn about, and let us see who can shoot straightest. Surely it is better to fight, even though we be killed finally, than allow ourselves to be made prisoners without striking a single blow in our own defense."

"I am afraid, lad, that we would soon find out who could shoot the best," I said, smiling despite the heaviness in my heart. "How long since you gave over riding with the hunters because you could not use your gun in the saddle? We might, by dismounting, stand them off; but they need only circle

around us beyond range until the remainder of the party comes up, as they probably will shortly, when our chances would be wiped out."

I feel certain that if there had been one chance in ten of our turning the tables, I would have taken whatsoever risk might have been necessary. As it was, with good reason for believing that those who had left the encampment with us must soon come up, it would have been worse than folly to begin a battle which could have but one ending.

If these fellows were bent on hunting or trapping, and counted to take us with them as slaves, then we were imprisoned indeed by the elements, for once carried above the waterways, anywhere south of the Des Moines River, we would be forced to remain captives no matter how many opportunities of escape presented themselves, because we could not hope to make our way down to Chouteau's Post when the land was in the grip of snow and ice.

In half an hour from the moment we knew we were prisoners, the little steeds showed such

signs of exhaustion that our captors understood some mercy was necessary, therefore the big fellow, who had held a position close behind us, gave the command to halt, and I rolled out of the saddle, thankful beyond words.

The sun was not more than an hour high when the remainder of the party came up, showing no surprise, but considerable satisfaction, at seeing us two lads apparently resigned to our fate.

Their ponies were even more nearly blown than ours, and I knew before they began making preparations for a long halt, that we would remain where we were during the coming night at least.

Save for the fact that our ponies were tethered at a considerable distance and with those belonging to the Indians, there was no evidence of our being captives; we were allowed to go and come as we pleased, so long as we did not make any attempt at approaching the horses, but whenever we moved toward them one of the redskins intercepted us, and words were not needed to make it plain that harsh measures would be resorted

to if we persisted in looking after our own property.

"They appear to be afraid we may try to run away," Bob said when we two lads had walked some distance from where our captors had built a fire preparatory to roasting fresh meat, for one of the late comers had brought with him a small antelope.

"They have no reason to be," I replied bitterly. "It is only necessary for them to guard the ponies, and we are helpless. We might set off now and walk until daybreak, and they could overtake us in a couple of hours."

The course was still due north when we resumed the journey an hour after sunrise the next morning, and with our ponies traveling at a pace which I knew they could keep for the next twelve hours without tiring, we advanced directly into that unknown region where would be found nothing to guide us on the return, if it so be we were so fortunate as soon to be masters of our own movements.

When noon came we were near to a chain of small hills, and an hour later we were come to where a ravine sloped downward, and

there on the plain beyond could be seen horses scattered about the low lands, or on the sides of the elevations, feeding peacefully, while far away in the distance were tiny specks which we had every reason to believe marked the site of the Indian village.

One of the Indians rode forward swiftly, while we lads were ordered to rein in our ponies, and then there was no longer any question but that we were nearly at our journey's end. My heart was heavier than it had been during the past four and twenty hours, for here amid the hills we were closely imprisoned after winter had set in.

We were two miles or more from the lodges when a dozen horsemen came out to meet us, and I fancied it was possible to read on their faces surprise because we lads were with the party.

The old man who had appeared to be the leader rode aside a short distance with these newcomers, and conversed earnestly in low tones, explaining, I fancied, the reason of our being there, after which we went forward at a rapid pace, until arriving at a village which consisted of fifteen or eighteen lodges, and, like

such places, was literally overrun with squaws, dogs and children, all of whom greeted us noisily.

Not knowing what we might be expected to do, I whispered to Bob to remain in the saddle when word had been given for us to halt in front of a certain lodge, and there we sat surrounded by a noisy, curious throng, until one of the Indians, throwing aside the flap of a small lodge, roughly bade us enter.

"I reckon there's no question now about our being prisoners," Bob said grimly as the flap was closed behind us, and we stood winking and blinking in what, after the bright sunlight, seemed like utter darkness.

We were left alone in the gloom of the tepee during ten minutes or more, and then an old squaw entered with a dish of stewed meat and a supply of fresh water, which she placed on the ground in front of us, after which she went out in silence.

The food gave forth a most savory odor, and Bob said as he bent over the dish :

"Of course that is buffalo or antelope, for it isn't likely the Indians can get any other kind of meat around here."

I made no reply to this question, fearing that I might cause such suspicions in the lad's mind as would prevent him from eating, however hungry he was; but I knew from past experience that dog's meat is considered a great delicacy by nearly all the Indians. The Nor'westers boast that they can "eat dog," and I suppose I could contrive to swallow it rather than starve; but I had no desire to take the chances just then, and claimed that I was not hungry. Bob, who was not troubled by knowing too much of Indian habits and customs, made a hearty and most satisfactory meal, smacking his lips as he swallowed the last morsel, and said as if the idea had only occurred to him when the supply of food was exhausted:

"Seems odd that you didn't want anything to eat, eh? You've ridden the same number of miles I have, and should have been just as nearly famished."

"A drink of water will finish me off in good shape," I replied.

Bob was hardly more than done eating when an old Indian, togged out in all his bravery of feathers and scalp-locks, as if paying a visit

to some one of importance, entered the lodge and silently seated himself on a pile of furs opposite the entrance, thus showing that he was the owner of the tepee.

I motioned Bob to follow my example as I sat cross-legged on the ground in front of the redskin. We and our visitor, or host, whichever he may be called, proceeded at once to the business on hand.

"My young men tell me you are from the north—from the shore of the great lake, where the white men have built a strong fort?"

"Yes," I replied quickly and emphatically, thinking in my folly that I might impress the old fellow with an idea of our importance. "A big fort, much goods, plenty of fur."

"Are all the traders there as young as you?" the Indian asked with what I fancied was a twinkle in his eyes.

"Oh, no. We are but the clerks of the traders—the young men who do the hard work. Not the voyageurs; but those who show the goods when you have pelts with which to buy them."

"These men in the north have many goods?"

"Heaps; many times more than at Chouteau's Post," and then, still foolishly imagining it would be to my advantage if I magnified our standing, I dilated upon the wealth, strength and bravery of the Nor'westers.

"These big traders are your brothers?"

"Ay; all my brothers, and there are many Indians in the north whom we call brothers also."

Then the old fellow asked us how it was that we were in the Spaniard's party, and to the best of my ability, for the Indian language did not fall trippingly from my tongue, I explained to him the position of affairs.

"Your brothers at the north will sing for joy when you go back to them?"

Again I proved my own folly by making it appear as if nothing would give the North-westerners more pleasure than to see us back at the fort, but the Indian's next words showed me that I had not only fallen into a pit of my own digging, but had failed to give this Missouri credit for having, as we say in the wilderness, a "large eye for a bargain."

"How many beaver skins will your brothers give if they can see you again?"

I was at a loss for words. It was evident that the Missouris had heard at Chouteau's Post somewhat concerning our story, and would have taken all four of us comrades prisoners had it been possible to do so without an absolute outbreak at the encampment. As it was, however, our own carelessness had thrown two of us in their way, and they counted on making us of the greatest possible value.

These Indians would not think it such a severe hardship to travel across the country, even so far as Fort William, in the middle of the winter, if thereby they might be well rewarded, and I was asked to set a price upon myself, when I questioned if my former employers would squander even five beavers to have me back again at the fort. Yet I dared not say so much to the old fellow, lest he think I was trying to drive a sharp bargain, and take it into his head that a bit of torture would bring us to a better sense of our helplessness.

By way of gaining time in which to think well upon my words, I did my best at explaining that we had left behind us at the encampment, from which we were lured, two comrades

without whom we could not return ; but once we were with them it would be possible to come to some satisfactory understanding.

This puzzled the old fellow not a little, much to my pleasure, and after apparently thinking the matter over for a moment, he stalked gravely out of the lodge, going, as I believed, to consult with the others of his tribe.

When we were alone once more I said to Bob, not with the idea of frightening him, but because the thought was so strong in my mind :

“ We have fallen into a hole, and through my own foolishness. Unless my tongue is smooth enough to persuade these scoundrels that their best course is to take us back where we can talk with Master Stewart and Colin, then are we like to come to sore grief in this village.”

CHAPTER XI

BARGAINING FOR LIBERTY

IMMEDIATELY after having given words to the despair which was beginning to creep into my heart, I could have bitten the end of my tongue with a right good will, for I had accomplished nothing by the outburst save the deepening of Bob's sorrow. Before I could do anything toward cheering the plucky little fellow, however, he pulled himself together like the brave heart that he was, and, looking me full in the face, forced a smile to his trembling lips as he said stoutly :

"It's not a very promising start toward forming a new company, Louis ; but we'd be making it a good bit worse by whining over what can't be helped. Tell me what you and that feathery old murderer were talking about."

I had forgotten that the lad could not understand the Indian language, and must be wholly in the dark as to the real situation ;

but now I repeated the substance of what had been said.

"How much would your company pay if these villains helped you to Fort William?" Bob asked when he knew why we had been treated to the visit of ceremony.

"Not so much as a yard of red cloth," I replied, saying that which I really believed. "I am only a clerk, hired at two hundred dollars a year, with promise of advancement after a certain time in case I do my duty. The Nor'westers can find all the lads they need at that price, and why should they pay these Missouris anything for taking me back?"

"It's worth something to rescue a prisoner who may be in danger of death."

"In the wilderness life is cheap; furs only are of value."

"But these red villains seem to think your company would pay a good price if you were taken back," Bob continued, and I replied bitterly, knowing full well that I was responsible for such belief:

"Ay, and it's all my fault. I tried to make it appear that I was of considerable importance at the fort."

"If they should take us to Fort William, and your people refused to pay the price, it would not be possible to lug us off again."

I leaped to my feet in excitement. This lad whom I believed ignorant of everything save what might be found in a city, had hit upon a possibility which was entirely overlooked by me. While the Nor'westers might not be willing to give any considerable price by way of ransom, they surely would not allow the Indians to carry off one of their number, however humble in rank he was, and once our captors had entered the fort we lads were free.

"But what about Master Stewart and Colin?"

Bob had raised my hopes without realizing that he was about to do so, and now he dashed them quite as unintentionally. We could not set out for Fort William leaving our comrades and partners to spend the entire winter searching for us, as they would unquestionably do, and, therefore, were we doubly prisoners.

I am ashamed to say that for the moment my courage deserted me entirely, and, covering my face with my hands, I was so childish as to allow a groan to escape my lips.

The little lad turned comforter on the in-

stant, throwing his arms around my neck as he insisted that we would speedily find some way out of our troubles, and before I had succeeded in pulling myself together, the be-feathered and painted red scoundrel returned.

He began by saying that he would send his young men to Chouteau's Post for the purpose of capturing Master Stewart and Colin, and when this had been done the Northwesters should pay him well for the services rendered.

I reminded him that the post was a strong one, and he could not hope to take from it two men without arousing an enmity which might lead to the slaughter of his people.

This proposition did not seem to frighten him; he had very much to say about driving the traders from that section of the country, and before he came to an end of his flowery speech I felt positive that all the Indians who had lately been trading with the St. Louis Company, were on the eve of an outbreak.

Then it was I found my wits sufficiently to urge strongly the impossibility of taking two people from the post without much loss of life, and proposed that the Missouris send a

peaceful messenger to Master Stewart, for the purpose of trying to get from him the ransom they counted on extorting from the Nor'westers. I told only the truth when I declared that my friends had a considerable store of goods belonging to them and us, and promised, if the messenger did not succeed in driving a satisfactory bargain, Master Stewart should give him a gun, if nothing more, for having brought word from me.

This last proposition seemed to find favor in the old villain's eyes, and once more he stalked out of the lodge to consult with the braves.

So much time had been spent in talking that it was now near midnight, and I proposed to the little lad that we lie down to sleep, for I did not believe the redskins would settle the matter among themselves until morning; but before we could act upon the suggestion the old reprobate returned, with six Indians at his heels, thus giving us to understand that a powwow was to be held in order to decide the matter finally. The old chief asked bluntly how we could assure him that the gun would be given to the messenger,

in case a man was sent to Chouteau's Post as I had suggested.

At this point I trembled inwardly, fearing it might be impossible to convince him that Master Stewart would keep the promise I made in his name; but the only hope was to declare stoutly that I would send the "birch-bark that talks," and if the reward was not paid he could put us to the torture, or let his people amuse themselves with us in any fashion that should be most agreeable to them.

I was careful, however, lest we might be called upon to pay the dreadful penalty, to impress upon his mind that my talking-bark would not speak to other than Master Stewart, and reminded him that in event of a failure to find the old hunter, it was still possible to carry us to Fort William for the ransom. He would simply be sending a single messenger on a comparatively short ride, in order to save many of his tribe from a long journey during which many hardships must necessarily be endured.

It was near to daybreak before the powwow came to an end, and then, to my great de-

light, it had been agreed that one of the young men would set off for Chouteau's Post without delay.

A smooth strip of birch-bark was brought, and, after kindling a small fire in the lodge in order to give me light, I began the task of tracing on the yellow surface with the point of my knife such a message as would tell in the fewest words possible of our plight.

It was a long task, and the mounted messenger was at the flap of the lodge before my labor had been finished. Bob aided me so far as was possible with advice, and when the letter was brought to a close it read much as follows :

"To Donald Stewart or Colin McKenzie: We, Louis Wills and Bob Drexel, are prisoners among the Missouris, in the hills two days' ride north of the hunting encampment. A gun is to be given the messenger, else we will be tortured. The Indians are making ready for an outbreak."

It was needless to say anything regarding the expected ransom. The messenger could give our comrades all that information, and my only aim was to acquaint Master Stewart

with our whereabouts. If anything could be done for our relief, he was the one man above all others, in my opinion, who might be depended upon to work the trick.

The old chief was standing near the mounted brave when I came out of the lodge with the "talking-bark," and I explained to him that it was not possible for me to make the medicine, as the Indians speak of written words, so strong that it would tell all he wanted me to say.

"Let the young Missouri who rides, say to the white hunter what you would have him know about the beaver which must be paid for letting us go free."

"But the talking-bark?" the old fellow said, looking at me suspiciously. "If the young man tells the white hunter all you would have him know, why does he carry the bark?"

"That is to tell the white hunter that a gun must be given. It would take me too long to make the medicine which would say all my brother has told me," I replied with so much of carelessness in my manner as could be assumed, for I was far from feeling easy in mind.

The old chief fingered the strip of birch-bark gingerly ; turned it on this side and that as if believing he might make out the meaning of the characters, and then with a certain degree of reluctance, or so it seemed to me, he handed the message to the fellow astride of the pony, saying something to him in a low tone, the purport of which I could not catch ; but I believed it to be instructions regarding the ransom.

The rider raised his whip, brought it down sharply upon the flanks of the pony, and the little steed darted off swiftly as a swallow flies.

The old chief pulled his blanket more closely about him, and, giving no further heed to us, entered the lodge which we had but just quitted.

As if they had been waiting for this signal, three or four squaws and a half a dozen children followed the chief, and Bob stood looking at me in amazement, as he asked :

“ Does it mean that we are crowded out ? ”

“ I reckon they allow we’re members of the family now, and at all events, it’s a pretty good sign that until the messenger returns we’ve got to provide for ourselves.”

We built a fire near by the lodge from which we had so lately been ousted, and, while warming ourselves in front of the cheery blaze, discussed the situation, which was anything rather than assuring.

In case the messenger failed to find Master Stewart or Colin, and was forced to return to the village without the promised gun, we stood good chance of tasting torture such as only the red fiends of the wilderness knew how to inflict.

It was only reasonable to suppose that our comrades, instead of returning to Chouteau's Post, had set out in search of us, and the Missouri who had been directed to find one of these two, might not show the "talking-bark" to any other, therefore his journey would have been in vain.

It was not until many days after that Bob and I heard the story of the arrival and the delivery of the message.

As it turned out, when we failed to appear at the encampment on the morning of the second day after our departure on the antelope hunt, Master Stewart and Colin were anxious regarding us, as might be expected, fearing

lest some accident had occurred. M'sieur Chouteau's employees, however, claimed that it was more probable the game had led us in the direction of the post, and, knowing the hunting party was to return on the following day, we would most naturally ride there, instead of coming back to the camp.

This was not according to Master Stewart's reasoning; but, knowing it was possible we had taken this course, the old man and Colin allowed themselves to be influenced by the suggestion, and the more willingly because they had no means of knowing in which direction we had gone.

Master Stewart, while talking the matter over with Colin, said, as I believed he would, that it seemed to him probable we had chased the game in the direction of the village of the Missouris, and had gone there, consequently if the two returned to Chouteau's Post, they could take canoe and go up the river with more assurance of striking the trail there than by venturing out at random.

Therefore it was, and fortunately for us, they went back to the post, but not finding us there, were making all preparations with two

voyageurs to paddle up stream, intending to embark on the business of the new company at the same time that they searched for us.

The canoe was loaded; the voyageurs were actually in their places awaiting the word to push off, and Master Stewart had lingered to speak with M'sieur Chouteau regarding what might possibly be done in case Bob and I should return before he came back, when our messenger rode up.

To a man so accustomed to wilderness-ways as was Master Stewart, it was not difficult to read on the birch-bark very much more than I had written. Because we had sent a messenger insisting that he should be given a gun for bringing the word, it was plain that we were prisoners, and immediately the command was given for the lading to be taken from the canoe, while the old hunter set himself down to question the young Missouri, knowing full well that if he would get all the information desired, the task before him was a reasonably long one.

Before the messenger would make any explanation whatsoever, he demanded the prom-

ised gun, and not until this had been given him did he answer a single question.

Then, and it was much like drawing teeth out of a buffalo-skull to get the information which he needed, bit by bit the Missouri parted with what he knew, until Master Stewart had before him a reasonably faithful account of the position of affairs, so far as we two lads were concerned.

The one thing of which he remained in ignorance was the proposition to carry us to Fort William for ransom. I had warned him of the danger of an outbreak, therefore he knew that it would not be absolutely safe to visit the village as a peaceful trader.

In his perplexity, for the old man did not really see the way before him, he went to Manuel Lisa and M'sieur Chouteau, and the Spaniard quietly, as if it was the most natural thing to be done, advised that he give up all hope of trying to release us.

M'sieur Chouteau, on the contrary, was full of sympathy, and while unwilling, in view of possible mischief by the Indians, to allow any of his men to leave the post, advised Master Stewart that if he could hire from the Astor

Company half a dozen men properly armed and equipped, it might be safe, before the beginning of hostilities, to present himself in force at this small village of which he, M'sieur Chouteau, knew the exact location.

Therefore it was that Master Stewart, whether wisely or not some other than I must say, decided to visit the Missouri village with only two voyageurs and Colin as his companions. More than that, he counted on taking his goods with him in order to begin the trading which he counted was to provide the new company with so much capital as would enable them to do business in proper fashion.

Manuel Lisa agreed to sell Master Stewart, on credit, eight ponies, four of which were to be ridden in turns by the party, and the others to serve as pack-animals; but the Spaniard would not permit M'sieur Chouteau to add to the stock of ammunition, because the amount of powder and ball at the post was already as small as was consistent with safety.

Work as our comrades might, eight and forty hours elapsed from the moment the messengers arrived until they were ready to set

off on the journey, and during that time there had been a decided but startling change in the position of affairs at the village where we were held prisoners.

A band of Missouris numbering fifty, I should say, had come into the valley bedaubed with black paint, and within two hours after their arrival preparations were being made for a war-dance.

CHAPTER XII

THE WAR-DANCE

WHEN I saw the Indians driving into the ground the wooden post which had been painted black, I knew that the hatchet was about to be dug up, in which case those at Chouteau's Post would have their hands full with defending themselves, to say nothing of trying to aid a couple of lads who had strayed into trouble.

It had not been my purpose to let Bob Drexel know of this new danger which threatened; but the arrival of the strange Indians and the ceremony of setting in the ground the blackened post, so far excited his curiosity that it became really necessary to tell him, and I fully expected to see him give way to despair, for verily I myself was in such a frame of mind at that moment.

On the contrary, however, the plucky lad gave no evidence of fear, although from his words I knew that he realized all the possibilities.

"Do you reckon they will get at their mischief right away?" he asked quietly, and because of the courage he displayed I decided that he should know as much as I.

"The setting of the blackened post means that a war-dance is to come off this evening, and unless I'm much mistaken, the Indians always start out immediately after such a ceremony. Therefore can we count that by tomorrow morning at the latest, these scoundrels will set off for Chouteau's Post, and in the shortest possible time thereafter, Manuel Lisa will find himself threatened with the very weapons which he was willing to sell for the sake of making a few dollars more."

"But there is no chance the post can be taken, strong as it is," Bob suggested.

"Stronger stockades than M'sieur Chouteau's, and defended by a larger number of men, have been overcome before now."

"And what about our comrades?"

"You know as much concerning their possible fate as I do. We will hope, however, that they are yet at the post, for there they will at least have a chance; but if they have started toward us, and meet the warparty——"

I did not finish the sentence, and indeed there was no need, for the little lad could readily understand what might be the result.

"Do you reckon we'll be left here in the village?" he asked, and I could only say it seemed probable, but just then had come into my mind the horrible thought that it was possible the idea of getting a ransom for us would be outweighed by the desire of these howling fiends to torture a couple of prisoners during the dance.

"Well, if they leave us behind and alive," Bob said, thus showing that, however ignorant he was regarding savage customs, the possibility of our being killed had come into his mind, "we must take the chances of trying to escape on foot, no matter what the weather may be. I had rather die fighting for life, than let these murdering heathen work their will on us later."

We were standing near by the lodge in which we had first been confined, when a great shout arose from all that throng of feather-bedecked, paint-bedaubed heathen, as they gazed toward that side of the nearest hill where the trees stood thickest, and, involuntarily looking in

that direction, we saw come out from amid the foliage a man wearing all the bravery of a war-costume. His face was painted black, and a headdress of eagle feathers was pulled well down over his forehead as he staggered toward the village like one in the last stages of exhaustion.

"Who can that be?" Bob asked, and I could answer the question, having once seen a similar figure.

"It is the war-chief of the village, and the fact that he has been in retirement shows that this outbreak was decided upon before the Indians set out to do their trading."

"I thought the old fellow in whose tepee we were first ushered was the chief of this crowd."

"So he probably is, that is to say, he's the highest in rank; but it often happens that there is another who leads the people to battle, and he, when an outbreak against the whites or a fight among themselves has been decided upon, goes into the woods carrying with him all his feathers and paint. There he is supposed to live as long as possible without food, praying meanwhile to the Great

Spirit for dreams which shall tell him how he can best win a victory. The fellow who is staggering in shows by his costume that the dreams have been favorable—that his party will be triumphant, and this mob are yelling themselves hoarse because of their joy. You notice that these redskins who lately arrived have their faces painted black like the war-chief; but before morning there will be plenty of red stripes in token of the enemy's blood which they are about to spill.”

The half-famished man made his way with apparent difficulty down the slope and across the plain, no one venturing toward him; but men, women and children screaming their loudest in an ecstasy of fiendish delight.

When he had come to the centre of the collection of huts, an old squaw went up to him with a clay bowl painted red and black, the contents of which he drank while kneeling, and then, leaping to his feet as if the draught had given him sudden strength, he began an impassioned speech, the words coming from his lips so rapidly that only with the greatest difficulty could I gather anything of their meaning.

It was possible, however, for me to make out that the Great Spirit smiled upon their plan of killing the white men who were over-running the hunting grounds, and that within four days they would have full possession of Chouteau's Post.

The words "kill and spare not" I heard repeated again and again, and each time they were uttered, those who stood nearest looked at us greedily, so I fancied.

"Is that old chap talking about us?" Bob asked, and thus I knew he also had noted the expression on the faces of those around us.

"He is telling them to kill all the white people without mercy."

"And they are like to try their hands on us first, eh?"

"There is a chance of it, lad, though we'll hope for the best."

"That won't prevent us from doing all we can in our own behalf?"

"What might we do? Our every movement will be watched, and there isn't the slightest chance of making an escape before the war-party leaves the village."

"I wasn't thinking of anything like that;

but it strikes me that we could put up such a fight as to provoke them to kill us outright."

"You're a brave little lad, Bob Drexel," I said admiringly, and his cheeks flushed with pleasure at what he considered praise.

"Not so brave as you think, Louis, for I'm too much of a coward to stand being tortured if I can force the killing in any other way."

By this time the war-chief's speech had come to an end; he and all the warriors, visitors as well as inhabitants of the village, disappeared within the different lodges, and straightway the squaws began making ready a feast.

A dozen or more huge fires were built at different points, and over these were hung kettles filled with water. Then the slaughter of dogs was begun by women and children, and no less than twelve of the brutes were killed by being struck over the head with a heavy rock. Yet the number of curs in the encampment did not appear to be diminished.

This supply of food was quickly prepared and thrown into the kettles, after which Bob said to me in a mirthful tone, as if we were

spectators at some odd festival which did not concern us in the slightest degree :

“ So they really eat dogs up this way, eh ? Well, I suppose dog meat is as clean as any other ; but from this out I’ll be mighty careful to know what kind of a stew is put in front of me before eating it.”

It was he who proposed that we set out in search of weapons, and while the braves of the village and the visitors were making themselves hideously gorgeous for the coming festivities, we walked as if without purpose here and there, until we found two hatchets which had been used in cutting up the dogs, and these we hid under our shirts.

When the time was come for the beginning of the ceremonies, the skins covering the lodge in which the war-chief had entered, were stripped off, displaying that high official seated on the ground smoking his pipe. He still wore the head-dress of feathers, and all his weapons were beside him, while the fantastic vermilion figures laid on his face and bare arms gave him a most hideous aspect.

In a twinkling all the braves in the village came out from the lodges in full war-costume,

and closing around the lodge, which was now no more than a skeleton of poles, seated themselves on the ground as near as possible to the chief, who gave no sign of being aware of their presence.

Then the squaws began the feast by distributing the stewed meat on slabs of wood, placing in front of each warrior fully twice as much as it seemed possible a single human being could devour, and not until all this supply of food was consumed to the very last morsel was a word spoken.

The war-chief had eaten nothing, neither had he raised his eyes from the ground; but continued to smoke slowly while those around him were feasting.

Then suddenly, with a shrill war-whoop, the chief leaped out from amid the tent-poles, hatchet in hand, and running at full speed as if about to attack an enemy, struck his weapon deep into the blackened post.

In a singsong tone, now low, and again loud and shrill, he spoke to the assembled throng, working himself gradually into a passion until he leaped this way and that, brandishing first knife and then hatchet, now

falling on one knee and then rising, as if engaged in some life or death struggle, and all the while the spectators remained dumb.

Five minutes or more were spent in this frenzied outburst, which I knew, without being able to distinguish many of the words, was the recital of the deeds which had been performed by him, and an account of what he, under the protection of the Great Spirit, would do when the war against the white traders was begun.

After the war-chief had come to an end of his fantastic yet thrilling performance, another Indian sprang up, going through the same manœuvres, and before he had finished a third and a fourth, until within a comparatively short time every one of the braves was dancing and yelling around the post, striving to make his words heard above all the others, and at intervals the entire party would give vent to piercing shrieks and deafening war-whoops.

I had supposed that when the orgy was well begun the attention of all would be directed toward us ; but much to my surprise it was as if the entire party had forgotten our existence, and a faint ray of hope shot into my heart as I whispered to Bob :

"Now is the time when we had best get under cover. It is just possible we may escape notice; but to stand here in full view seems much like folly."

"How would it do to take to our heels? These fellows won't get through with this thing for quite a spell, and the knowledge of what is in store for us should lend considerable speed to our feet."

"It would only be exerting ourselves to no purpose, Bob, for you know full well that they could overtake us as readily as does a cat when she allows a mouse to make a dash for liberty. Better crawl into one of these lodges, and if a struggle comes we shall be able to hold out the longer."

I led the way to one of the smaller tepees, at no great distance from the chief's lodge, where we could see what was going on and thus have warning in case they came to seek us.

The Indians danced, and shrieked, and yelled, until one by one they sank upon the ground breathless. The squaws fed their children, and themselves ate to the point of suffocation upon the remnants of the feast, until they also flung themselves at full length near

the fire, and an hour before daybreak all within the limits of the village, save only Bob Drexel and I, were given over to the sleep of sheer exhaustion and repletion.

"It looks as if we had come through the hullabaloo without any very great damage," Bob said with a chuckle, when the last of the shrieking demons had fallen to the ground.

At this time it seems strange to me that we lads could sleep after having suffered so much of suspense and agony of mind; but so we did, slumbering soundly until the squaws in whose lodge we had taken refuge, entered and bade us begone.

When we went out into the open those who had taken part in the mad proceedings of the night were ready for departure, and we saw them leaving the village in single file, still wearing all their feathers and articles of adornment, as if in such fantastic garb they proposed to make an attack.

"We'll hope M'sieur Chouteau's people will be able to send those fellows out of the world without too great expenditure of ammunition," Bob said with a sigh of relief. "It's mighty pleasing to see the last of 'em."

"Don't fancy, lad, that they have really gone."

"Do you mean to say they haven't started for the post?"

"Ay, they've started; but do you notice the squaws following them?"

"Yes, and what of that?"

"The gang will halt within half a mile or so, and perhaps spend the greater portion of the day there, during which time they'll pull off all their feathers and ornaments, stripping themselves down to breech-cloth, moccasins, and a single blanket. They don't take the chances of losing their valuables when there is a job of murdering to be done."

"Is there a possibility they may come back for us?"

"I believe not. Never one of them would return after having once departed, because of the bad luck which it is believed would follow, and unless it was to kill us, which could have been done more conveniently last night, they wouldn't want us in their company."

"And you allow that we shall be left alone for a time?"

"Yes, unless they come upon some omen

which tells them that the attack must be postponed. These red scoundrels are mighty superstitious, and the howling of a dog or the note of a bird will oftentimes put an end to such an expedition as is now begun."

"Then it stands us in hand to make plans for running away. Starving or freezing is better than being tortured," Bob said, as he read the hesitation in my heart by the expression on my face.

"It shall be as you say, lad. I have no desire to linger here, and was only reckoning up the chances against us. The war party cannot get back for four or five days at the earliest, and we have plenty of time in which to lay our plans."

"The sooner we go the longer start we'll have."

"Ay, lad, and I promise you that to-morrow night we will make the attempt."

CHAPTER XIII

MASTER STEWART

WITHIN half an hour after the war party stalked out of the village, a number of squaws led the ponies in the same direction as that taken by the braves, being forced to make many trips, since even the visitors had left their horses behind, and then we two lads and five or six old men and women were the only persons remaining. It would have been a favorable time in which to run away, save for the fact that we had not gathered a supply of provisions—I was even hoping we might come across a gun.

We visited as many of the lodges as was possible without being seen by the old people, and got enough of dried meat to provide us with food during at least a week. If any weapons had been left behind we were not so fortunate as to find them.

At a late hour in the afternoon, when the squaws came back with the finery of their

masters, and followed by all the children of the village, Bob and I were lying on a pile of skins in the lodge to which we had first been introduced, with the store of dried meat beneath us.

"If the squaws drive us out they'll be almost certain to find our plunder," Bob whispered when the hum of voices told that the non-combatants were returning.

"We mustn't let them do anything of the kind, lad. If we put on a bold front it will be possible to do very much as we please, providing there's no show of trying to leave the village; but if we once give token of being afraid, the next four and twenty hours will be mighty uncomfortable for us."

"I'll agree to hold out as long as you do," the lad replied with a laugh, and he had hardly more than spoken before an old squaw, drawing aside the flap of the lodge, angrily ordered us to take up our quarters with the dogs.

"We have been left behind here, and shall stay till the war party returns," I said stoutly, speaking in the Indian tongue. "It is for you to go elsewhere, otherwise will your back

taste the whip when our brothers come home again."

The woman hesitated an instant, as if debating with herself whether she should fall upon us with the first weapon at hand, and then, probably fearing lest we had really been ordered to stay where we were, she withdrew.

When I woke the next morning at dawn I was shivering with the cold, although I had drawn a robe over my feet before going to sleep, and this surprised me, for when we entered the lodge the air had been warm and summer-like.

When I drew aside the skin which formed a door the reason for the sudden change in the temperature was made apparent, and a cry of dismay burst from my lips.

"What's the matter?" Bob asked as he leaped to his feet.

"It's snowing heavily, and is freezing cold!"

"Our war party will have a nice time of it, stripped to the skin, if what you said was true," the lad cried with a laugh, as if the snow had in it nothing of menace to him.

"With only a blanket over him an Indian will suffer less in this weather than you or I, when we set off on our escape."

"Cricky! I'd forgotten that we are booked for quite a journey!" he exclaimed as he went back shivering to bed. "Do you allow that winter has come at one pop like this?"

"It isn't likely we'll have any intensely cold weather for some time to come; but you can count on snow from this day until the ground is covered with from six to eight feet."

"You still agree that we shall try to leave here to-night?" the lad asked sharply, suddenly turning to face me.

"Ay, that I do; but we're not like to get very far away."

"So that we're our own masters I'm satisfied," and Bob flung himself down upon the robes again.

The storm increased as the day grew older. We lads remained inside the lodge, not minded to do more than poke our noses out now and then in the hope of seeing signs that the storm was nearing an end, and were expecting each moment some of the squaws would bring us

dinner, when suddenly we heard in the distance a faint cry as of a human being.

"The war party has turned back!" I cried, and with the belief came a certain sense of relief because it would be impossible for us to get away after the braves returned.

Bob ran to the flap of the lodge, and as the cry was repeated he shouted excitedly:

"It's Master Stewart who is calling!"

Then, before I could put forth my hand to stop him, he ran out into the storm, shouting at the full strength of his lungs, I following close at his heels.

Two minutes later the blood bounded through my veins as though it would burst the skin which confined it, for I saw emerge from the curtain of falling snow, first Master Stewart, and then Colin, while following in close order were two strangers and the Indian messenger to whom we had promised a gun as reward for carrying to Chouteau's Post our words on birch-bark.

Master Stewart greeted us as if it was the most natural thing possible that he should be there just then, and after clasping Bob and me by the hand he turned to the strangers, order-

ing them to look after the ponies, which I rightly supposed had been left near at hand.

Once we were inside the lodge, he told us how he chanced to be where he was most needed, and when I expressed surprise because he had not fallen into the hands of those who had gone to attack the post, he further explained that the guide had led them through a blind pass in the hills, going some distance out of their way when signs of the storm were first seen, to avoid the possibility of being cut off by the snow.

"I grumbled a good bit on account of his goin' so far around, an' am now ashamed of myself, for if we had followed the reg'lar trail we'd run full tilt unto that gang of wolves who're bound for the post."

Then Master Stewart named the strangers who had accompanied him: Batiste Bonn, and Adolph Vallaincourt, the two voyageurs, whom he had hired from the Astor Company.

In due course of time we learned that our comrades had brought with them all the goods purchased from Manuel Lisa, with the exception of one gun which had been given the messenger, and thus it was that, without

intent on our part, the new company was in the wilderness ready for business.

An end would come to our trading, however, before it had really begun, unless we left the village in advance of the war party's return.

Master Stewart claimed that it was our solemn duty, regardless of any financial considerations, to make with all speed for the post with the poor hope of being able to warn those within the stockade of what was threatening, and, failing in such purpose, to push on to where the Astor Company was encamped.

"While the voyageurs are with us we might put up good winter quarters," Colin suggested faintly, and the old man replied decidedly :

"We won't think of ourselves, lad, while white men who have given us shelter are in danger."

"The chances are ten to one that we run directly into the painted wolves," I said stoutly, believing we were bound to look first to our own safety.

"We'll try to take that one show, Louis, an' if we come to grief, knowin' of what's afoot, it'll be my fault."

"When shall we set off?" Bob asked, and I could see that he was eager to be on the trail.

"Not later than mornin'. If them skunks turn back without attackin' the stockade they can't get here sooner than that, so we don't run much risk of bein' caught by them."

"Will the ponies be fit to travel if they are out all night in this storm with nothin' to eat?" Batiste asked, and I thought there was a good bit of sound sense in such a question.

"How many braves are here in the village?" Master Stewart asked sharply, and I replied that none save the old men had been left behind.

"Then we'll give our ponies the surprise of their lives, for they shall be stabled in one of the lodges, an' if there's any corn hereabout, as there should be, it'll be brought out for their benefit."

He took up his gun as he spoke, and going outside began calling loudly for the messenger who had guided him up from the post.

A moment later we heard the sound of voices in angry altercation, and very shortly afterward came the command for all hands to turn out and care for the steeds.

Master Stewart had driven the squaws and children from one of the largest lodges, and was following the messenger in his search for corn when we lads and the voyageurs came out into the storm.

It was not a simple matter to find the animals in that blinding downpour; but we finally succeeded, and soon the weary little ponies, probably for the first time in their lives, found themselves beneath a shelter.

The old hunter succeeded in getting two bushels of corn on the cob, and, after the pack-horses had been relieved of their burdens, this was thrown on the ground where all the animals could get at it conveniently. Then we went back to our lodge benumbed with the cold, although not having been in the open air more than half an hour.

"It's only a taste of what we'll have before summer comes again," I said as Bob stood chafing his aching hands. "This is nothing as compared with that which is in store for us," and the lad replied cheerily :

"We'll stand whatever comes, and without a whimper, now our crowd is together again."

And I shall let that remark stand as ex-

pressive of the joy and relief we all felt after having been in the lowest depths of despair.

"The ponies are fit as fiddles," Master Stewart said in a tone of satisfaction as he entered the lodge early the next morning. "That feed of corn has not only surprised, but actually made them frisky. There's nothin' to prevent our settin' off as soon as the tea has been made."

"And you count on making Chouteau's Post?" I asked.

"Ay, lad, or comin' as near as may be. Unless the red sneaks have already succeeded in capturin' the stockade, we should be able to drive them away, for the naked villains will not be very brave in such weather as this."

"It was in my mind that we might be so unfortunate as to meet them on the road, in which case the new company would come to grief," I suggested.

"The new company must take its chances, for our duty is to lend what aid we can to white men who may possibly be in distress," Master Stewart said curtly, and this ended the conversation so far as I was concerned, for the

old hunter was one with whom I did not care to enter into an argument, particularly when I had the weaker end of it.

While we were drinking our tea the Indian who had acted as messenger entered the lodge, and squatted down on the ground as if believing a full share of the meat would be served out to him.

The stew had already been divided among our party, and Master Stewart said gravely to the visitor :

"My brother must look to his squaws for food, since he has come too late for breakfast. My young men are in haste to set out on their journey."

The fellow looked up in surprise, and then, laying his hand on my shoulder, said :

"This young brave belongs to our village, and so does that one," he added, pointing to Bob.

"It may be they will return ; but now both must go with me," Master Stewart said decidedly.

The Indian started to his feet, and it was evident that he counted on mustering the full force in the lodges to prevent our leaving :

but the old hunter checked him by saying emphatically :

“My brother will stay here in the lodge until we set out, an’ drink tea with us, of which we have plenty. He will not put any stone in the road of these young braves, lest we who have come for them should be angry.”

The Indian seemed to understand when the old hunter left the lodge that it would be useless for him to make any attempt at disobeying the command, for he remained quiet ten minutes or more, when the voice of Master Stewart from the lodge near by summoned us for the start.

The pack-animals were loaded, and I who had counted on seeing only four ponies saddled, found to my surprise that there were six.

“Have you doubled the loads?” I asked, and Master Stewart replied grimly :

“No ; but we thought it a good plan to borrow a couple of ponies from your friends here in the village to make up for the two you brought. Batiste an’ I got them from the corral before you were awake.”

When we set off none of the Indians were to be seen, save the messenger, and he had

evidently decided that it was not safe for him to put any impediment in our path.

Master Stewart led the way; then came the pack-animals, the guides and the two voyageurs, and we three lads brought up the rear.

I fully expected that we would be saluted with a shower of bullets before having gained the hills which enclosed the valley; but greatly to my relief, and somewhat to my surprise, we were allowed to depart in peace, simply because those in the village did not dare provoke a fight.

Master Stewart led us through a rough pass in the mountains, further to the north than the one by which Bob and I had come, for it was his purpose to avoid, so far as might be, the probable course of the returning war party, and we could proceed only at a walk because of its being necessary to advance with the utmost caution on this seldom-used trail.

Twice during the day we stopped at a water-course to break the ice that the animals might drink. When the shadows began to lengthen we were on a narrow tongue of land formed by the bend of a small stream which came down from the hills to the northward, and in

the midst of a cottonwood and willow growth. It was a likely spot for a camp, and I was well pleased when Master Stewart suggested that we halt here for the night.

"We may not find another place which has so many advantages as this, an' certain it is we cannot travel more than half an hour longer, therefore it is but little waste of time to pull in here," he said. "We'll run up a lean-to for ourselves, an' the snow is so light that the ponies can get at grass enough to satisfy their hunger."

Half an hour later we had a cheery fire in front of a camp of brush. Colin was stewing the dried buffalo meat; Batiste looked carefully after the kettle of tea, and Master Stewart and I were stacking our goods beneath the apology for a shelter.

It was understood that each in turn was to stand watch for an hour, not with any idea that danger might threaten, but in order to keep the fire roaring, for each instant was the air growing more chill, and we could count certainly on having winter weather before morning.

It was yet dark when Master Stewart awak-

ened us with a command that almost frightened me :

“ Get out, lads, it is nigh to mornin’, an’ we have a good bit of work before us, because by the look of the weather we’re like to spend the winter hereabout.”

CHAPTER XIV

WINTER QUARTERS

WHEN the old man announced his purpose of putting up winter-quarters, no one made protest, for all realized that we must be housed without loss of time.

Screened from the full force of the wind by the surrounding hills as we were, nothing prevented our beginning the work of building a camp at once, even though the storm was at its height, and Master Stewart, the two voyageurs and Colin set about the work of hewing down trees while Bob and I brewed tea and boiled dried buffalo meat for breakfast.

Before Bob and I had made ready the breakfast, trees enough had been felled to mark out the shape of the hut. It was to be about eight feet wide and twelve long, with the front wall six feet high, and the rear sufficient to give a slope to the roof of logs. At one end we proposed to build a shed in which the ponies could get some semblance of a shelter during the most bitter weather.

The storm continued without intermission throughout the day; but, save for the time while Bob and I were cooking the meals, all hands of us labored energetically, and when night came our camp-fire was built within the walls of the hut.

Not until the afternoon of the third day did the snow cease to fall, and then we were literally hemmed in, for it was piled up everywhere around to a depth of from four to five feet, and so dry and fleecy that even snowshoes would have been useless until after the surface should be stiffened by frost.

Both the hut and the shed were completed. In the former we had a fireplace, with a hole in the roof immediately above it as a vent for the smoke, and the door was a buffalo skin which could be pinned down at the bottom to prevent it from swinging with the wind.

We had a table made of hewn log on which to eat, and blocks as seats for those who could not sit cross-legged on the ground with ease. Our goods and supply of provisions were piled in one corner, which further added to our comfort, since they served to prevent the wind from finding entrance at that particular place.

As a matter of course the snow was blown now and then through the illy-chinked crevices, and much would work its way around the pliable door; but take it all in all we were sheltered better than the majority of traders who spend the winter in the wilderness.

The ponies were in sumptuous quarters as compared with what they had been accustomed to having, and we shoveled the snow away from the front of their shed that they might the more readily come at the dried or frozen grass. We also made for them a road to the stream through the willow thickets, therefore they had ample space in which to move around, and we had good reason to believe they would take on fat during this time of idleness.

Master Stewart set about making snowshoes immediately the work of building had been finished, and a very creditable article did he turn out. The frames were fashioned of willow, and because of this fact were heavier than would have been needed if he could have used tougher wood. The network, which should have been made of sinew, was composed of narrow strips cut from a

buffalo-skin, and stretched as tightly as possible, but even after the greatest care had been exercised, it was certain the strands would sag grievously when they were wet.

While the old man worked at this task, Bob and I fashioned for ourselves outer garments from buffalo skins which we had brought from the village, while the remainder of the party spent their time cutting wood for fuel, or in chinking the walls of the camp, and while laboring we speculated upon the fate of those at Chouteau's Post, or wondered if the Indians had learned of the Astor Company's camp.

"What about the Indians who counted on holding us for a ransom?" Bob said to me one morning, while we were breaking the ice in the stream for the ponies to drink.

"Well, it's possible they may find out where we are, in which case they'll either be glad to trade, or try to make it hot for us."

"Don't you reckon they could cut up mighty rough?"

There was no doubt whatsoever in my mind but that the Missouris might succeed in making considerable trouble for us; but I

was not inclined to admit as much, for there is no sense in crossing a bridge before you come to it, therefore I tried to dismiss the matter by saying :

“ While we’ve got the shanty for a fort the red sneaks will keep at a distance. Indians are rank cowards, when it comes to a stand-up fight, and don’t pick a quarrel without being certain of having the best of it.”

If the Missouris had been successful in the attack on Chouteau’s Post, then would they fall upon us ; if they had failed, there was a possibility we might be able to trade instead of fight with them. In either event, I found no pleasure in speculating upon what they could do in the way of making matters disagreeable.

Before Master Stewart had finished making snow-shoes we had good reason for believing the winter had really set in. We stacked up our fuel in front of the door until a wall was made which served to break the force of the wind, and were no longer troubled by having snow blow in under the robe.

Our two voyageurs were neither hunters nor trappers, therefore until Master Stewart

had made snow-shoes for all the party we remained idle, save for such tasks as I have already mentioned.

Then came the day when the old man was at an end of his work in our behalf, and announced that on the following morning he proposed to set out on a hunt with the hope of getting fresh meat to add to our supplies, otherwise we were in danger of being hungry before spring, unless we butchered the ponies.

The snow was in the best condition for traveling, and as the hunters skimmed swiftly along over the white, glistening surface it seemed to me as if theirs was the greatest possible pleasure to be enjoyed in this world.

We who were left behind had little hope they would find much, if any, game; but looked upon the expedition as one arranged solely to pass the time pleasantly, therefore were we surprised and overjoyed when, two hours later, the three returned, each carrying over his shoulder an antelope.

"Fresh meat!" Bob cried in delight. "How did you happen to get those fellows when you had no horses with which to ride them down?"

"We've left nine others behind us, and you lads can take your turn at packing antelope."

"Nine?" I repeated incredulously, looking sharply at Master Stewart, and the old man replied:

"Ay, lad, that's the figger. We got twelve in all; found 'em in a trap of their own makin', an' killed the whole boilin'."

Then I understood why our hunters had been so successful; but it required many words and considerable time before the matter was explained to Bob's satisfaction.

When members of the deer family are overtaken by a snow-storm, they walk around and around in a circle, treading down the fleecy particles, and thus preventing themselves from being buried outright. By such manœuvre a circular space is beaten hard, and the animals have ample room in which to move about without discomfort; but in event of a heavy downpour, such as had lately been experienced, it often happens that the surrounding snow rises so high above the circle that the deer are regularly imprisoned, and nearly every old hunter can tell of having found such a death-trap.

Master Stewart and his companions had come upon a place of this kind, and, as a matter of course, were able to shoot the entire herd without stirring from their tracks, thus providing us with a supply of fresh meat at the very time when it was most needed.

Next day Master Stewart superintended the setting of the traps, of which we had no less than thirty among our baggage, and the work of visiting and tending these every four and twenty hours would provide us with ample employment.

"The new company has had a great start in the world, and all by a series of accidents or apparent misfortunes," Colin said in a tone of content when our first day's work as trappers had come to an end, with every member of the party tired, but reasonably happy. "We should get a lot of pelts hereabout, even though we don't find opportunity to do any trading."

"I'm allowin' to move around a good bit after we get well settled down to business," Master Stewart added, "an' it'll be strange if we can't make a dicker for fur that has been taken by others."

"Will it be safe to mix up much with the Indians if they are on the war-path?" Colin asked, and the old hunter replied carelessly:

"I reckon this snow has taken all the fight out of the sneaks for quite a spell. They'll be wantin' to keep close in their villages for a good many months; but whether they're achin' for a fight or no, I'm willin' to take my chances of lookin' in on 'em. I've done it before when they were buzzin' like ugly bees, an' never come to any harm."

"But in this case you carried off two prisoners for whom they expected to get a big ransom, and with a village of the Missouris so near, we stand a chance of getting into trouble," I ventured to suggest.

I am unable to say whether this possibility gave the old hunter any uneasiness; but if it did he succeeded in hiding the fact most admirably, and one would have said that the nearness of the Indian village was to him a source of satisfaction rather than otherwise.

I shall set down very little concerning the six peaceful weeks which followed the opening of the trapping season. We had by acci-

dent happened upon the one spot above all others in that section of the country where fur was abundant. It was a lean day when we did not bring in at least twelve beaver, and we were not surprised when the number ran as high as twenty, while of other pelts we took in like proportion. Had we owned an hundred traps I dare venture to say we might have caught three times as many animals in prime condition, and it did not require that a fellow be an expert accountant to be able to say with certainty that we would come out of the wilderness, providing no ill-fortune befell us, with so much of fur as would give us sufficient capital to warrant the establishing of a post of our own.

Then, on a day when we were more than usually confident of succeeding in our purpose of getting together sufficient capital to admit of starting out at the beginning of the next season as full-fledged traders, the scene changed with startling rapidity.

We had just come in from the traps, and had as spoils sixteen beaver, which was a remarkably good catch for thirty traps, when the robe forming the door of our hut was

raised, and we saw framed between the skin and the logs an ugly, red, grinning face.

"How!" the unwelcome visitor grunted as he forced his way inside, and to our dismay six others followed, all well armed, and acting as if they were indifferent whether we received them in friendship or enmity.

At the first glance I recognized two of the party as young bucks whom I had seen in the village when Bob and I were held there as prisoners, and the one thought in my mind was that we had come to an end of our fur gathering.

Master Stewart acted the part of host, inviting the visitors to the fire, and at once making ready a stew of antelope meat which had been cooked that morning, as he asked concerning their luck at trapping and hunting during the past month.

Not until the last morsel had been eaten did the redskins deign to answer any questions, and then, after announcing that there were many pelts at the village which they would be willing to trade if we had such goods as their people wanted, the leader of the party said as he pointed to Bob and me:

"The Nor'westers belong in our village; we are sad because they went away while we were at the river."

"You went to see the white traders," Master Stewart interrupted, giving no heed to the fellow's words. "Are the Spaniard an' the Frenchman still at the post?"

The visitors did not seem inclined to talk much about what might have happened at the post; but would have continued on the subject of their late prisoners, had not the old hunter pressed the matter by asking:

"Is the hatchet yet buried between my brothers, the Missouris, an' the white traders?"

"The white men are the friends of the Missouris," was the only answer the old hunter could get, and thus we knew that if these scoundrels did attack the post, their plans failed, otherwise there would have been much boasting, for an Indian dearly loves to tell of his exploits, dwelling at great length on every detail of cruelty.

When one questions a redskin he soon finds that it is a roundabout road to come at an unsatisfactory answer, and Master Stewart soon tired of trying to gain information concerning

Chouteau's Post; but in the meanwhile he learned that our visitors had really come for the purpose of getting ransom for Bob and me, they holding that we were in fact their prisoners who must be returned to the village if demand was made.

To this last proposition the old hunter would not listen.

It was not difficult to understand that the visitors were displeased by his plain speaking, although they evidently tried to hide their feelings, and after a great deal of talk which really amounted to nothing, one of the party drew from beneath his robe three beaver skins, asking that he be given in payment for them one of our best blankets.

Then ensued a bargaining which pleased Bob Drexel hugely, but was of no particular interest to Colin or me, who had witnessed many such scenes.

The result of it all was that Master Stewart displayed nearly all our goods before the trade was brought to an end, and I had a very good idea that the pelts had been produced for no other purpose than to tempt us into showing how much of value we had.

The beaver fur finally became our property, and because it was the first transaction of our independent company, we lads were in high glee regarding it, although at the same time both Colin and I believed trouble would come to us owing to our having allowed the Indians to see what we had in camp.

The visitors were not in a hurry to leave a place where they could get food in plenty. All the party remained with us during the night, and, as can well be supposed, one or another of our company stood guard, ready for anything in the way of mischief.

Master Stewart walked with them a mile or more from the camp in order to be certain they had really set off toward home, and when he came back we had good proof that they had not shut his eyes as to their intentions.

"It's time to gather in our traps, lads, an' make ready for trouble," he said when we were by ourselves once more. "I'm thinkin' that the snakes won't give us very much time in which to prepare for their second comin'."

"Then you believe they really mean mischief?" Batiste asked in surprise, and Mas-

ter Stewart replied as if thinking the question needless :

“ Mischief? That ain’t a name for the dose they’re countin’ on givin’ us, an’ we’ve got to put in some mighty good work if we want to keep our hair.”

But few moments were spent in idle talk. We three lads and one of the voyageurs went out after the traps, and when we returned, heavily laden with iron and game, Master Stewart was hard at work on what looked to me much like the runner of a sled.

“ Are you making ready to beat a retreat ? ” I asked, and he replied grimly :

“ Ay, lad, for that’s what it must come to if we can contrive to beat ’em off the first time.”

“ But surely we stand no show of escaping if we try to take our goods with us. Once they overhauled us in the open the end would come quickly.”

“ I’m not countin’ that as certain, my boy. ‘Cordin’ to my figgerin’ the first party that tries to wipe us out will be a small one, an’ if we beat ’em off as oughter be done, the whole crowd will try their hands at the job. Now

I'm allowin' that after the first battle, if we're left alive, it's our business to get out of here mighty quick. Of course they'll have the best of us once we leave this place; but we're bound to be gobbled up in case we stay for a second fight, consequently it's our move to take the chances. Lug all the meat inside, an' get a supply of water."

"But the ponies!" Bob cried.

"They'll be run off, of course, an' I count they're as good as lost to us already; but that ain't a cryin' matter, for it's no sure thing we could use 'em while the snow is so deep."

While Master Stewart worked at the sleds, the remainder of the company stowed the frozen meat in the main camp, filled every kettle with water, and overhauled the pile of fuel until it entirely guarded the doorway. We also cut loop-holes between the logs on every side so that we might give a good account of ourselves when the trouble began, and continued to toil at this last task until the night was more than half spent.

Then Master Stewart insisted that all of us lie down to sleep at the same time, arguing that there was no good reason why we should

stand watch yet a while since the Indians could not go to their village and return in less than four and twenty hours.

The morning passed without our seeing anything suspicious, and Batiste and Adolph announced quite confidently their belief that Master Stewart had been over-suspicious, when I caught a glimpse of an Indian's top-knot among the bushes directly in front of our camp.

"One of them has got here, at all events; shall I send a bullet his way to show that we're on the alert?"

"Not a bit of it, lad. Let 'em keep on skulkin' 'round till we've finished these sleds, an' then will be time enough to open the scrimmage," Master Stewart said calmly.

CHAPTER XV

BESIEGED

WE were undoubtedly in the greatest danger. The Missouris knew full well that we had what seemed to them like a large amount of goods and pelts, and it was only necessary they make their attacks with ordinary prudence, holding us closely besieged meanwhile, in order, finally, to capture the hut with all its contents.

Before two hours had passed we saw here and there the forms of the redskins as they darted from one shelter to another, striving to keep out of sight as much as possible, and thus knew that the camp was entirely surrounded. Colin pleaded for permission to fire whenever he saw a target, claiming that hostilities had really begun, and it was folly to wait until the scoundrels had gotten into an advantageous position; but the old hunter was deaf to his entreaties.

“Once the shootin’ begins, all hands of us

must stand to our rifles, an' I am not minded, if it so be we can prevent it, to let them commence the attack before we are ready to retreat."

"But surely you cannot think of leaving here while the hut is surrounded," Bob ventured, and the old man replied cheerily :

"No, lad, but it's in my mind that we may want to set out within a mighty short time after havin' beaten 'em off, an' if we were forced to work at the sleds while it might be possible to put many a mile 'twixt us and this place, there is no telling how much such a delay might cost us."

Not until late on the afternoon had Master Stewart finished his task, and then the rude sleds were loaded with our goods, pelts and provisions, save that of this last portion of the burden a sufficient amount was kept out to provide us with food during the next four and twenty hours.

"Now the sooner they begin work the better I'll be pleased," the old hunter said, seizing his rifle after lashing on the rough vehicles the last package of goods. "If so be you see a head now, fire at it; but take good care that

your aim be true, for the villains will be heartened every time you miss."

"It begins to look as if they had gotten where they wanted to be, and were not counting on showing themselves until after dark," Colin replied somewhat bitterly, remembering how many of the enemy he might have brought down. "We will catch it hot enough when it's no longer possible to see anything."

"Then they'll have the same trouble as we in finding a target," Master Stewart replied as he took up his station at that end of the camp which overlooked the shed where the ponies were huddled together.

During the hour which followed hardly a sound could be heard either inside the camp, or in the forest beyond, where we knew the Missouris lay hidden, and then night had fully come. Master Stewart raked ashes over the glowing embers, and poured upon them sufficient of water from our store to extinguish any spark of light.

There was no need to ask why he did this, for even Bob could understand that the glow inside the hut while all was dark beyond, would enable the foe to pick us off with ease;

but the little lad, realizing what of discomfort might soon come to us, said in a half whisper :

“ We’ll be mighty cold before morning, and that’s a fact.”

“ There’s nothin’ to prevent your movin’ around briskly whenever you want to keep up the circulation of blood,” the old hunter said grimly, and the words had hardly more than been spoken before the report of a musket rang out startlingly clear and distinct on the still air, while the ping of a bullet and the splinters which flew from one of the logs inside the hut, told that the Missouris had opened the battle with marvelously good aim.

A second report from the outside, and almost at the same instant Master Stewart’s gun was discharged, a shrill cry of pain following the flight of the bullet. He had aimed at the flash which he saw amid the trees, and so truly as to bring down his game.

“ If I could shoot like that ! ” Colin exclaimed in a tone of envy, and the old hunter replied with a laugh :

“ So you can, lad ; there’s no trick about it. It’s only a case of bein’ ready to pull the trigger.”

"It may seem that way to you who are accustomed to such work ; but I should simply waste the ball."

"Better do that than let them think we're asleep," the old man said, and then we fell silent again until it seemed as if the hut was completely encircled with a flash of light, while from the reports which followed it was as if no less than fifty weapons were discharged at the same instant.

Each of us fired, aiming at the flashes ; but it was impossible to learn whether any execution had been done.

I counted it as certain that the enemy's plan was to remain at a distance, taking the poor chance of sending their bullets between the crevices of the logs ; but Master Stewart, who most likely had had much experience in such matters, suddenly left his post and stood directly under the hole in the roof which had been cut to give vent to the smoke.

We had with us six spare guns, and one of these he seized as he ran across the floor. There was another volley from the outside as soon as the Indians could reload, and while the echoes were still resounding among the

hills Master Stewart fired as if into the air, a heavy body falling upon the white ashes almost immediately afterward.

"Stand by here, Louis, an' be ready to shoot if you see a head," the old man cried as he leaped upon that which had fallen, and while I sprang to obey the order there was a struggle amid the ashes as of two men in deadly embrace, which came to an end almost before I was in position to look through the aperture.

Then Master Stewart arose to his feet, and seizing another spare gun stood opposite me, peering upward.

I was so dull that not until I saw the dark outlines of a head and arm across the hole in the roof, did I realize that the heavy attack had been made simply for the purpose of distracting our attention while the enemy gained lodgment upon the roof, counting on shooting us down from there.

Fortunately, however, I had my wits about me sufficiently to take good aim, and a few seconds after my weapon was discharged the falling of something upon the pile of fuel in front of the door, and then on the snow beneath, told that I had dislodged an Indian.

"Stay where you are, lads!" Master Stewart cried as Colin and Bob would have come to take part in this battle through the roof. "Do not let the scoundrels get too near, and pour bullets into them whenever you have a chance."

While I stood on guard the old hunter reloaded the weapons which had been discharged, and after five minutes or more had passed, he said to me:

"Go back to the wall, lad. I'll stay here, though I reckon there's little need of it, for if there were more on the roof than the two we picked off, they've beat a retreat."

It was as if being checked in this clumsy attempt to surprise us had disheartened the redskins, for during the hour which followed not a sound could be heard, and, strain our eyes as we might, no target was to be seen in the gloom.

Then suddenly Colin's gun spoke; a shrill cry of pain rang out on the still air, and as I glanced across that portion of the open which was within his line of vision, I saw a dark form limping hurriedly toward the thicket.

Without loss of time I fired, and the scoun-

drel pitched forward on his face, giving token that there was one Missouri the less to work us mischief.

"What was he doing when you saw him?" I asked while reloading my weapon.

"Sneaking up toward the wood-pile. I reckon the Indian you rolled off the roof is so badly wounded that he can't crawl away, and the fellow who's just been knocked out was counting on pulling him under cover."

"Up to this time I'm allowin' we're ahead," Master Stewart said with a chuckle of satisfaction. "Three of the snakes have been curled up for good, an' I'll answer for it that as many more are luggin' around our bullets in their skins. Take my word for it, they'll keep under cover till mornin', if no longer."

From that time until perhaps half an hour before daylight, we stood watch without seeing or hearing anything to betoken the enemy's whereabouts, and then came the ping of a bullet as it entered fairly between the crevices of the logs without striking the wood on either side.

Caught napping, as it were, not one of us was quick enough to send a messenger of lead

in the direction of the flash ; but immediately afterward we had ample opportunity, for the red men had opened fire on us once more, shooting from a circle that extended entirely around the camp.

Master Stewart sprang to the centre of the room again, where he could have an eye on the aperture in the roof, and cried to us as if believing we needed urging :

“ Give it to 'em good an' hot, lads. You should be able to bring down two or three before this round is finished, an' the harder we hit now the sooner they'll haul off for repairs.”

There was no other attempt made to gain a position on the roof ; but those in the thicket poured a hot fire into us as if the one desire was to expend ammunition, and I asked myself vainly again and again what could be the reason for such a performance, since there was not one chance in a thousand that we would be hit by the missiles thus sent at random.

Ten minutes later the question which had so puzzled me was answered, for then it was I smelled smoke, and, looking around to see if

any one had been so foolish as to kindle a fire, saw in the gloom that Master Stewart had deserted his post to pull aside the skin which hung in the doorway.

The smoke increased until all of us were searching with our eyes to discover its source, when the old hunter said quietly, as he let drop the robe and stood beneath the hole in the roof once more :

“Some of you lads must have had sand in your eyes, for the snakes have crept up an’ fired the pile of fuel.”

“Think you the camp will be burned?” asked Bob.

“An Injun is thick-headed, except on the trail, an’ this shows it, for it’s a stupid trick to try to burn green logs while there’s so much snow on ’em. If the wood-pile gives any signs of burstin’ into a blaze, we should be able to tumble it over without makin’ targets of ourselves.”

The smoke troubled us not a little, but the frosty air, as we pressed close against the logs on watch, cooled our smarting eyes, and we gave but little heed to the fire until suddenly the flames shot upward, illuminating all the

thicket opposite the front of the camp to such good purpose that we sent two bullets home before the skulkers had time to seek better cover.

"I reckon that trick served us better than it did them," Master Stewart said with a chuckle, and then, raising the robe a bit, he kicked over the top of the wood-pile, partially extinguishing the flames.

But there was sufficient light shed by the tiny tongues of fire to show the Indians where to aim, and during the next ten minutes more bullets came through the crevices than was really comfortable. Batiste had a long red line on his cheek as token that he stood within an inch of being put out of the fight, and twice had I felt the "wind" of a missile as it passed by my head.

"They shoot well," the old hunter said approvingly. "I never believed an Injun could send a bullet so close."

"And they'll do better when the day breaks," Colin suggested.

"I'm allowin' that they'll keep well under cover then, knowin' that the sunlight will help us a good bit, so it won't be too one-

sided," and Master Stewart fired with effect at a head which was incautiously shown at one side of a tree-trunk.

As the light grew brighter we found more targets; here and there an Indian, believing himself hidden from view, was disclosed by the new day and warned of his danger by the sting of our bullets. I have good reason for believing we wounded three before the band realized that it was wisest to fall back, and then all was silent again.

Master Stewart cut some slices from the dried meat which had been left out of the packages, and handed one to each of us, after which he took up his gun as he went toward the doorway, halting there long enough to say :

"Keep your eyes open, lads, an' don't venture out unless I give the word."

"Where are you going?" I asked in alarm.

"To have a look around. I'm thinkin' this crowd will get back to their village mighty soon, an' we can't afford to lose any time if it's to be a case of pullin' out."

"But you're taking big chances!" I cried.

"Ay, lad, that's what one of us must do

else the scoundrels can go for reinforcements an' get back before we know that the way is clear," the old man replied quietly, and the words had hardly more than been spoken when he disappeared from view.

A full hour passed in silence, all of us in the camp standing on guard without seeing anything, and then suddenly the old hunter stepped out from the thicket directly in front of us.

"Get to work on that wood, lads, an' throw it aside so we may pull the sleds out," he said sharply, and as we drew aside the screen of skin Colin cried :

"Have the Indians gone?"

"Ay, the whole boilin' of 'em, sound, wounded an' dead, save for the two there by the wood-pile; but we can safely count that there'll be a crowd of 'em nosin' 'round 'twixt now an' nightfall, so it stands us in hand to strike the trail mighty lively."

It was not a long task to throw aside the fuel until a path for the sleds had been made.

Master Stewart proposed to lead the way with one of the ponies, for which we had made rough harness, to pull the sled. Batiste was

to follow with the second team, Adolph with the third, and Bob with the last. Colin and I, each with a saddled pony, were to bring up the rear.

"If we can coax these beasts over the snow our labor will be tremendously lightened, so handle 'em softly, and at the same time keep moving at a good sharp pace."

We knew full well that the Missouris would soon be on our trail, and hampered as we were, it could be a question of only a few hours before they overhauled us.

CHAPTER XVI

A RUNNING FIGHT

THE one fear in my mind as we marched rapidly along, or floundered in the snow pulling the ponies out from the treacherous drifts into which they had sunk, was that Master Stewart might not be on the most direct course to the river. While we were trapping at the bend of the creek, which seemed such a desirable place for the new company during the winter months, I heard the old hunter say he had never been in this section of the country when the snow was on the ground, and I questioned if now, with no landmarks to guide him, he could say exactly whether this or that course was most likely to lead us to a place of safety.

During the morning we pushed steadily forward, and when noon came it was the belief of all that we had traveled not less than twelve miles, having traversed the distance with greater ease than had been anticipated.

It is true that at times we had been forced to spend ten minutes or more in pulling this pony or the other out of a snowdrift, but where the frozen surface upheld us the pace had been reasonably rapid. But yet the enemy could easily overtake us in half the time we had spent.

Our feet were sore because of often breaking through the crust, the legs of the ponies were cut and bleeding in many places, and all the party were weary through much walking where the foothold was far from being firm. Save for the fact of what we knew was behind us, one or all would have called for a halt; but, under the circumstances, we pressed on heedless of our condition, because of the desire to travel as many miles as might be possible before night came.

It was Master Stewart who proposed we take a "nooning" of an hour to get our wind while the ponies fed on the willow twigs and bark of cottonwood trees, these being the only eatables for them that could be come at, and he had no more than made the suggestion before we threw ourselves down on the snow, panting as if from long running.

I had counted to see little Bob nearly exhausted, but to my surprise he bore up under the strain better than any member of the party save Master Stewart, and was even in fairly good spirits when we halted.

"It's a mighty fine thing for us that we're trying to get ahead so fast, else we might freeze to death," he said with a laugh, and straightway my courage was strengthened, for I said to myself that if a little lad who had never lived outside a city could find anything in the situation for which to be thankful, surely a Nor'wester had no good cause to grumble.

We resumed the journey when an hour had been spent in the halt, and as the day grew older the advance was made with less difficulty, because of our having arrived where the heavy tops of the trees had prevented the snow from falling unequally. Here the surface had frozen so solid that it was seldom one of the ponies broke through the crust.

There was neither laughter on our lips nor mirth in our hearts when the shadows of night began to fall, for we were so nearly exhausted that it seemed almost impossible to

advance a single pace further. Even the ponies gave signs of being winded, and when we were come to a heavy growth of cottonwood near a creek, Master Stewart said with so much of cheeriness as he could assume :

“ I allow we'd better camp here, lads. We're not travelin' so fast that it'll make much difference whether we stop now, or an hour later. You lads shall do your best at steepin' tea, while Batiste, Adolph an' I knock together somethin' in the way of a shelter.”

The old hunter acted upon his own suggestion, and while he and the voyageurs were hewing down trees as if they proposed to make a veritable cabin, we lads unharnessed the ponies, turning them loose to find whatsoever they could to eat, after which Bob built a rousing camp-fire, while I set about stewing meat and making tea.

Not until Master Stewart had a lean-to built, with a regular breastwork of logs enclosing it, would he allow himself or the voyageurs to cease working, and then we gathered around the camp-fire almost too nearly exhausted to eat.

Two or three dippers of hot tea served to

revive us somewhat, however, and as we slowly chewed the tough meat Bob asked :

“How far do you reckon we are from the new company’s last stopping place, Master Stewart?”

“Anywhere from twenty to twenty-four miles, lad. It has been a stiffish bit of work ; and all hands had been lyin’ still so long that we wasn’t in fair shape for travelin’. Tomorrow we should be able to make five or six miles more without workin’ any harder.”

“And how long before the Missouris will be close on us?”

“Then you’re countin’ that they’re sure to come?” the old man asked with a smile.

“I thought that was what we’d all agreed on,” Bob replied simply.

“An’ why do you want to know about when they may get here, lad? Is it in your mind to figger up how much the new company has made since noon?”

“I wanted to find out if we could sleep to-night, or if it was a case of standing guard. By the way you’ve piled these logs up, it looks as if you thought we might have a scrimmage.”

“I did that only as a matter of precaution.

At the soonest, we don't stand a show of seein' the Missouris before daybreak, an' I'm allowin' it may be well on to noon when they heave in sight."

"Then we may turn in?" Bob asked, as if all he wanted in this world was an opportunity to sleep.

"Ay, that you can, lad. I'll be stirrin' before sunrise, an' can look after the camp then."

"And you don't count on standing guard now?"

"Not a bit of it, lad. Turn in as soon as you will, an' if it so happens that I need the pluckiest boy to be found between the two oceans, I'll give you the first call."

Bob looked remarkably happy as well as tired, when he rolled himself in his blanket and burrowed into the snow, for Master Stewart was not given to praising any one, therefore did his words carry all the more weight.

Not until a new day had fully dawned did I awaken, and then it was Master Stewart who disturbed me as he raked the embers together that he might set the teakettle on them.

"How long have you been astir?" I asked

in a low tone, that our companions might not be aroused by the sound of my voice.

"Not more than an hour. I turned out jest as the first of the Missouri snakes came up."

"The Indians!" I cried in alarm, thereby awakening the remainder of the party. "Are they near at hand?"

"I can answer for it that two of 'em are, an' it stands to reason the whole gang are on the road."

"What did you see, Master Stewart?" Bob asked as he crept out of the blanket and began examining his gun to make certain it was in order.

"Jest as I opened my eyes I saw one of the scoundrels sneakin' up to find out why these 'ere logs were piled up in such a fashion, an' before he'd satisfied his curiosity another came on his trail. I was gettin' ready to give 'em a dose of lead, when they took to cover, an' thus saved their precious hides."

"That is really no proof that the whole gang are close at our heels," I said, determined to find whatsoever of comfort there was in the situation.

"Not a bit of it, lad. On the contrary, I'm allowin' that these two were alone, else you can make certain they'd have fired into us. Now the question is whether we shall push on, or wait here to show what we can do."

The old man looked around as if asking our opinions on the matter, but no one ventured to make a suggestion until Colin said :

"You are the leader, Master Stewart, and it's for you to decide what shall be done."

"I'd a leetle rather it should be settled between us. It may be we can travel three or four hours without bein' interfered with; but then we might be in the open, without show of holdin' our own as we can here."

I looked questioningly at Colin, whereupon he said decidedly :

"Give the word, Master Stewart; your opinion is better than ours, and we'll stand by the decision, whatever it may be."

"Then I shall say go on," the old man replied thoughtfully, as if weighing well each word. "We take the chances of bein' caught in the open with a good show of comin' to grief; but at the same time we may find ourselves in a better position."

"And we stand a chance of saving the ponies," Bob added. "This company isn't so rich yet that it can afford to lose any of its property."

Master Stewart laughed at this prudent suggestion, and set about catching the ponies in order to harness them.

"Stand by with your guns, in case any of the villains are close at hand," he said cheerily, and then walked boldly out in full view of any who might have been in hiding near by, thus giving us an exhibition of bravery such as is seldom seen.

Half an hour later we pulled out from our snug place of defense, and pushed on at the best possible pace in the direction where it was supposed the river would be found, knowing full well that if the Missouris were not already close upon us they soon would be. Master Stewart insisted that I should lead the way, looking after the sled which had been his care during the previous day, while Colin led both saddle ponies.

This the old hunter did that he might bring up the rear, which was the place of danger, and I was not a little disgruntled because he

thus counted on sending Colin and me into positions of comparative safety.

It can well be fancied that we did our best at getting over the ground, more particularly since we were come to a portion of country in which no good shelter could be found, and if we did slacken the pace ever so slightly, it was only where there was sufficient of timber to admit of our throwing up something in the way of defense.

The sun must have been within two hours of setting when came the first note of danger.

"Look well for a chance where we may make a stand," the old hunter shouted. "Let Colin lead the way with both ponies, an' do you come back with me, Louis."

Although I had no desire to venture into a position of great danger, it gave me much pleasure that so experienced a woodsman as our partner should have called me out from among my comrades to aid him in the fight, for certain it was that he believed an attack might soon be made, else the line of march would never have been disturbed.

At the moment when he spoke there could be seen ahead of us, perhaps a little more

than a mile distant, a heavy growth of cottonwood, and while passing the halter of the pony to Colin I said hurriedly to him :

“ There is where we should make our stand, and do you head straight for it.”

“ That’s what I will, Louis, and unless you are too sorely pressed, we should be able to make it. Pass the word for the others to push on at the best speed.”

With this he set off on the run, urging the ponies to keep pace with him, and as I hurried back to the rear I explained to those in care of the sleds that which we were striving to accomplish.

Before I gained Master Stewart’s side our little company were advancing at considerably better than a walk, leaving the old hunter some distance in the rear, and, search as I might with my eyes, it was impossible to see any signs of danger.

“ Are you certain they are near at hand, Master Stewart ? ” I asked in surprise.

“ Ay, that I am, lad. When I called to you it seemed as if they were about to make a break. Nearly a score showed themselves, an’ but for the fear of bringin’ the whole boilin’

down upon us before we were in a convenient place, I would have lessened the number by one."

We walked swiftly, with our heads turned watching for any token, and I had as yet seen nothing when the old man brought his gun to his shoulder with the quickness of thought, and fired.

Then it was that I saw a painted, half-naked form leap from amid the foliage in our rear, and pitch forward on his face in such a manner as told that for him, at least, pursuit was ended.

"Shoot to kill when the next one shows himself," the old man said sharply as he began reloading his weapon; "but try to hold on, if it so be you can, until I am ready, for one or the other of us must be in condition to fire, else will the odds be against us."

No others of the redskins had shown themselves when we heard the sound telling that trees were being felled, and again I gave vent to a cry of joy, for I knew that our companions, having arrived at the place decided upon for a stand, were throwing up a barricade, behind which each of us would be equal to any five of the pursuers.

While the two voyageurs plied the axes, Bob took it upon himself to tether the ponies in such a manner that they could not stray, and thus it was that all our party found lodgment in this rude fortification, wherein, thanks to the network of branches, we could remain unseen. The Indians might not come up in the rear save by making an exceedingly long detour, for outside of this particular thicket the country was comparatively free from forest growth of any kind.

Despite the fact that we stood in deadly peril of our lives, the pangs of hunger assailed us most keenly ; we had eaten nothing since morning, and traveled at our best pace over an exceedingly hard road, therefore when Master Stewart suggested that Bob build a fire in order to make tea and stew some of the dried meat, while Batiste and Adolph continued to strengthen the fortification by closing it on the sides and in the rear with hewn trees, I felt as if it was the one thing needed to put us in proper trim for fighting.

The Indians, seeing that we had succeeded in gaining a place where a successful stand might be made, kept out of sight at more than

gunshot distance, as nearly as we could guess, and this holding back was no surprise, for unless the sneaking redskins have much the advantage it is seldom they trust their precious bodies in a rush, or, what soldierly people would call a "charge."

"The sneaks can always be depended upon to haul up for a powwow at such a time as this," Master Stewart said grimly as he stood close against the barricade, watching intently the bushes in front of him. "In a country where there's plenty of timber a runnin' fight ain't the worst kind of a scrimmage in the world, because of this same lazy fashion which the villains have. If they dared to stand up face to face in fair battle, the fur traders would soon be cleaned out of the country."

"They're holding off to close in on us in the darkness," Colin suggested, and Master Stewart laughed as if there was in the proposition something which pleased him hugely.

"A fine time they will have of it, lads. With two hours of daylight yet ahead of them, the voyageurs should be able to hew enough of these cottonwoods to make a regular fort, an' while it'll be a case of gettin' along with-

out a fire, I count that we have little to fear before daylight."

Bob had a supper of stewed meat and tea ready by the time we had satisfied ourselves that the Indians were making no effort to advance on either side of us, and we made as hearty a meal as if we had been snug behind the walls of Fort William.

CHAPTER XVII

A REAL BATTLE

WHEN we resumed the journey that morning, knowing beyond a peradventure the Missouris were close at our heels, I did not believe we could find a spot so well adapted for defense as was the camping-place we were then leaving; but here we were inside a veritable fortification, well supplied with food for both men and beasts, for the ponies had pawed away the snow until they found the grass and moss beneath. We lacked only water, which last, on a pinch, could be had by melting snow.

The shadows of evening were beginning to lengthen when, supper having been eaten, Master Stewart directed the voyageurs to extinguish the fire even to the tiniest ember, and we, wrapped in our blankets to protect ourselves so far as possible from the biting cold, crouched behind the fallen trees to await the

coming of those who were bent on murdering us in order to gain possession of our belongings.

Little Bob Drexel, who had yet to show the first sign of fatigue or despondency, would have engaged us in conversation relative to the business of the new company, but the old hunter cut him short by saying in a whisper.

"This is a time when all of us must keep our tongues between our teeth, lad. At the hut we had proof that some of these Missouris are good marksmen, an' the sound of our voices would give them a hint as to the direction in which a bullet might be sent with advantage. Do not stir around any more than may be absolutely necessary, an' shoot at every movin' thing you see."

It was dull work remaining silent and motionless, striving to keep the frosty air from one's ears and nose as we strained our eyes in the fast gathering gloom to catch the first glimpse of an enemy, and before the time of suspense came to an end I was really hoping the Indians would begin the fight, for almost anything seemed preferable to inactivity.

The one matter which puzzled me was as to

how the redskins, half-naked as I believed they were, could withstand the frosty air, and I flattered myself with the thought that unless the fight went speedily in their favor a retreat would be absolutely necessary on their part.

It seemed to me as if three long hours had passed before we saw the first sign of the enemy, and then it came in the shape of a bullet, sent apparently from the brush directly in front of where I was stationed. The missile whistled past my face, and so near that for the instant I believed it had inflicted a wound which had not caused pain because the flesh was benumbed by the frost.

Then came a bewildering sense of surprise because the weapon had been discharged so near at hand, when we believed the enemy was yet a long distance away, and involuntarily I sprang forward, forgetting that in so doing I was offering the foe a fair target.

Master Stewart, who stood within four paces of me, was not the kind of a man to be confused by unexpected danger, and instead of staring around as I did, he forced his way outward among the tree-trunks in eager search

for the fellow who had so skilfully crept up on us without our knowledge.

It was a move which might have cost the old hunter his life, and probably would have done so but for the fact that the Indian was alone, and, as a matter of course, with an unloaded weapon.

While I stood there peering out into the gloom, and realizing that it was necessary to have all my wits about me, I saw a dark form spring up from the snow not twenty paces off, breaking into a swift run directly away from us.

Then it was I fired, and even in the darkness could tell that the bullet had taken effect, but without disabling the fellow, who continued his flight at a slackened pace, not yet being lost to view when the old hunter discharged his weapon.

Master Stewart was not so rash as to stand outside the barricade many seconds ; but made his way back before I had finished reloading my gun.

“ We have been mighty careless, or our sight is failin’ us,” he said grimly, while ramming home a fresh charge of powder. “ How that

scoundrel sneaked up so near is more than I can say."

"It must have been a cold job, unless he had on more of clothing than when the attack was made upon the hut," I added.

"An' so this one had, lad, for I made out a skin huntin'-shirt, if nothin' more, which gives me to believe that they have outfitted for a long, cold march, an' we needn't count on their bein' driven back very soon by the frost."

Perhaps it was our conversation which told the enemy in which direction to shoot, for at that instant a crackling noise, as a dozen muskets were discharged from as many different points among the brush directly in front of us, rang out on the frosty air, and every member of our little company, save the old hunter, whose gun was not yet loaded, was sufficiently on the alert to fire at the flash of the weapons.

With this discharge we had good proof, if any had been needed, that we were not in as secure a position as while defending the hut, for the bullets whistled among us so thickly I could not but wonder why one or more had not been wounded.

"That is not bad shootin', for permisc'ous

work in the dark," Master Stewart whispered approvingly while we were reloading, and the clinking of the ramrods against the frosty gun-barrels so clearly betrayed our whereabouts that conversation could do us no more mischief.

"The bullets came in a bit too close together to suit me," Colin said with a faint laugh, and the old hunter added quickly :

"When we have reloaded, take stations further off. One man is enough here at the angle, an' let the others range themselves a dozen paces apart, in order to cover the rear as well as each side, for that fellow showed us how readily the sneaks can creep up now that night has come."

As he said so we did, with the understanding that he who saw any considerable number of the foe in front of him should give the alarm, in order that the remainder of us might rally at that particular point.

As a matter of course the Indians were forced to spend a certain time in reloading, and when those who had fired upon us were ready to begin work again, they set about it without delay.

During the next half hour it was a constant

succession of bullets from the enemy, and answering discharges from us as we saw the flashes. Then the battle, for surely such it could be called, ceased for an interval, and I believed our company had escaped injury despite the fact that so many missiles had come among us, until I saw that the old hunter had stripped off his buckskin shirt as if to examine a wound.

Even while understanding that I had no right to leave my post of duty, I ran toward him with bated breath, for he of all the party was the one whose services we could least afford to lose. I saw the blood trickling from his arm.

"Are you much hurt?" I asked anxiously, and he replied with affected carelessness:

"Nothin' to speak of, lad. I caught a bullet in this arm; but reckon it has gone through without doin' more than startin' a little blood."

"Does it pain you now?"

"Nothin' to speak of, lad. Hardly more'n a wasp's sting, an' it ain't worth talkin' about."

"It is likely to be stiff."

"Perhaps a trifle; but seein's it's the left one there's little harm done."

There was no more than time in which to put Master Stewart in shape for work again before the enemy showed signs of renewed activity, and then each of us had all he could do in looking after himself, without giving any heed to the others.

The Missouris were coming up on both sides of the fortification, being able to do so under cover of the darkness, and there were many moments when I questioned whether it would be possible for me to hold in check those who were making the attack upon that portion of the defenses which it was my duty to guard.

I discharged and loaded my gun until the barrel was so hot as to be uncomfortable to the touch, not finding time to exchange it for one of the spare ones, and then at the very instant when I had determined to call for help, the firing ceased.

"Anybody hurt?" Master Stewart asked in a low tone, and to my intense relief each of our company in turn answered "no." One of the ponies was creating a disturbance

among his fellows, and being nearest where they were tethered, I ran to ascertain the cause. A bullet had cut a furrow across the beast's rump; but, like Master Stewart's wound, it was not serious, and to guard against a possible stampede, I secured him in such a manner as to prevent his doing mischief.

No single hour of the night passed without such battling as I have already described, and the wonder of it all was that the Indians did not succeed in doing more damage. Yet when day broke the old hunter's wound and the pony's bloody rump were the only tokens of Missouri markmanship.

Just before daybreak the Missouris made their fiercest attack, and ventured so far out from cover that now and then we could see with reasonable distinctness the outlines of their bodies; but when the darkness had been dispelled not an Indian was to be seen, and Master Stewart said in a tone of exultation, after we had scanned the surrounding forest in every direction :

"Considerin' how well we've come out of this 'ere fight, it don't seem just right to call

it a hot one, an' yet there have been times since that sneak crept up under the brush-wood, when I believed they were ready to make a rush which would end it all in their favor."

"Have they pulled off, think you?" little Bob Drexel asked as he washed his powder-begrimed face with snow.

"I'm afraid there's no such luck as that, lad. Havin' come so far they are like to give us a harder tussle before turnin' back. Start a fire, Batiste; the flames will do us no mischief now, an' we'll warm up a bit with hot tea."

After we were comparatively warm came a desire for food, and once more a stew was made, all of us partaking heartily. Then it was that Master Stewart laid his plans for the day.

"I'm not minded to venture out very far in order to learn whether the sneaks have gone back, for it's in my mind that there are no hiding places close round, an' we'll have another taste of their shooting to-night. I'm allowin' that Louis an' I do guard duty for the next two hours or more, while the rest of

you sleep, and then we'll take our turn at it, because it stands us in hand to be in good shape for hard work when the sun sets again."

When, as nearly as we could judge, two hours had passed, Master Stewart proposed that we awaken our comrades, but then my eyes were wide open, and I pleaded that they be allowed a little more rest, after which we would have a longer time off duty. Therefore it was that noon had come before I shook Bob Drexel, and he asked sleepily while arising to a sitting posture :

"Have the Indians got ready to go at it again?"

"I can't say as to that; but the time has come when you are to do your share of guard duty. Five hours of sleep should be enough for any lad, even though he is city-bred."

Colin stood erect, gun in hand, before he was fairly awake, and I laid down on his blanket with slumber weighing heavily upon my eyelids, for it was as if the instant my time of duty had come to an end, all the weariness of body became apparent.

Until half an hour before sunset I knew

nothing of what was going on around me ; the possibilities of what the Indians might succeed in doing, the biting cold, the fears of the future if it so chanced we lived to strike the trail again, were all blotted out by sleep, and then I was aroused to a consciousness of our disagreeable situation when Bob shook me gently, while whispering in my ear :

"The Indians are beginning to show themselves, and it's time you and Master Stewart took charge of the camp."

I was on my feet in an instant, and a single glance around showed our comrades who had been on duty while the old hunter and I slept, standing guard as if expecting an immediate attack.

I was on the point of pouring for myself a dipper of tea when a low cry of surprise from Bob Drexel caused me to look quickly in the direction where it was supposed the enemy lay hidden.

A dozen or more of the redskins were showing themselves boldly beyond gunshot range, and, when making certain of having attracted our attention, a big brave stalked into view waving vigorously what might, by a great

stretch of the imagination, pass for a bit of white cloth.

"It begins to look as if the sneaks really want to hold a parley," Master Stewart muttered, and by the expression on his face I knew that he was perplexed.

The Indian walked boldly up until within thirty paces of the barricade, and then came to a halt, standing in the chill air with bare arms and legs, looking like a statue of bronze.

"Why has our brother tried to shed the blood of the Missouris?" he asked, after waiting a full minute as if expecting the old hunter to begin the conversation.

"Because the Missouris have tried to kill us, first by makin' an attack on the hut where they were warmed and fed, an' then by followin' when we struck the trail. We had not fired a shot before one of your people crept up on our camp like a snake, and would have killed those on watch."

"He was only trying to take that which belongs to us. We had two prisoners, young braves from the north, and my brother stole them away."

"They were not rightfully your prisoners;

they followed your braves in peace an' friendship on the hunt for antelope, an' you forced them to your village before the pipe of love had cooled after bein' smoked by the white men an' the red. Now what would you?"

"Give us back that which you took when we were absent from the village, and you shall go in peace."

"Can I believe him who speaks with a double tongue? Was word sent to the traders at Chouteau's Post that you had dug up the hatchet? While you were after the scalps of those who fed you, I found my young men prisoners in your lodges, an' carried them away. They will stay with me, an' if the Missouris try to take them, the blood of the red men shall flow like water, for my medicine is stronger than that which your squaws make."

"We will carry back your scalps at our belts!" the scoundrel cried, as if he had lost his temper, and the old hunter said threateningly:

"So far we have done no more than defend ourselves; but if you try longer to do us harm I will bring the white traders here with all

their men, an' the villages of the Missouris shall be laid in ashes. Be off, you snake, lest we mistake you for a polecat an' fire without heed to the rag you hold ! ”

The Indian hesitated an instant as if minded to say more ; but the old hunter called for his gun, and, when it was handed up to him, leveled the weapon at the Missouri as he cried :

“ Run, an' run fast, or you'll never have a chance to raise another white flag ! ”

The Indian evidently understood that this was no idle threat, for he set off at full speed, never stopping until he had screened his precious body from view far beyond gunshot range.

“ Why did that fellow come out with the flag ? ” Colin asked as Master Stewart stepped down from the barricade, and it was as if he took the words from my mouth, for I would have asked the same question.

“ He allowed that we'd give up Louis an' Bob in order to get off without any more trouble.”

“ But was that the real reason ? ” Colin persisted. “ They must have known we wouldn't

do anything of the kind. I believe he only wanted to see what kind of a fortification we'd put up."

"Since you've guessed it, lad, I may as well own up that I saw as much before he'd got well along with his palaver. He was lookin' this way an' that, tryin' to find the weakest spot, an' I stood his nonsense as long as I could. It was a child's trick, an' I never saw the Injun who was sharp enough to deceive any save a baby. They'll give us one more skirmish at long range, an' then take a sneak back to their village."

"How does it happen that you can read their plans so well?" Bob asked in mild surprise.

"It's plain as the nose on your face. See-in's they hadn't done us any harm after a full night's work, the most of the gang wanted to strike the back trail; but this sneak, an' a few others like him, held on to trick us, an' now, findin' that the game didn't work, the others won't put up very much of a fight. It's for us to hug the logs so there'll be less chance of stoppin' a bullet, an' shoot only when we have a fair target."

The old man said this with the air of one who is confident that he knows it all, and then set about getting supper, overhauling one of the packages in order to come at some of the frozen antelope meat.

That night we feasted on steaks broiled over the glowing coals, with plenty of salt to flavor them, and not until we were filled to repletion did Master Stewart give the word that the fire should be extinguished.

It seemed cruel to deprive ourselves of the warmth when the cold was so intense that one's breath literally froze to his lips; but it would have been little less than an invitation to death had we kept the blaze going after the night was fully come, and, wrapping our blankets more closely about us, we tried our best to appear cheerful.

Late in the afternoon those on guard had tethered the ponies nearer the south side of the barricade, where they might, by vigorous pawing, come upon a fresh supply of dried or frozen grass, therefore the animals were quiet, with little chance of giving us any trouble unless perchance another bullet went their way.

However confident Master Stewart may have

been that the enemy would not put up a very stiff fight, he relaxed none of his vigilance. We were given stations at such points as admitted of covering with our eyes all the surrounding country, and bidden to fight or watch in silence unless there appeared to be imminent danger of a sudden dash, in which case, as a matter of course, an alarm was to be given.

CHAPTER XVIII

SNOWED IN

THE fact that we had fought during the previous night what Master Stewart was willing to call a hot battle, and come off with no serious injury, strengthened my courage wondrously. While cowering behind the logs, trying in vain to shelter myself from the piercing cold, I really hoped the Missouris would make a stiff fight, if so be they were not inclined to draw off entirely, because while a fellow was forced to struggle for very life he forgot in a certain degree the suffering caused by the frost.

Night had fully come before the enemy fired a shot, and then a single bullet whistled through the brushwood, coming as a messenger to tell us that the Indians were yet inclined for our blood. Every member of the company was on watch at that particular moment; but no one saw the flash of the weapon, and Bob said with a laugh which was cut short by the chattering of his teeth :

"If they count on keeping so far away that the light of burning powder can't be seen, we may as well lie down, for there's no show of our being able to send a bullet where it will do the most good."

It always heartened me to hear the little fellow's words; if I was inclined to grumble because of being uncomfortable, the knowledge that the city-bred boy could find somewhat of mirth in the situation, never failed to bring me to my proper senses again, and I laughed aloud at his display of petulance that the enemy did not show more courage.

Then Master Stewart pressed my arm as a signal to follow him, and I went into the angle of the fortification where we were comparatively alone.

"I want you to stand here, lad," the old hunter said in a whisper. "I'm goin' out to have a look around ——"

"Surely you won't venture among the redskins when a single soft spot in the crust would deliver you into their hands!" I cried, forgetting in my alarm that he desired to talk with me privately.

"There is little danger, an' much good may

come of it. I shall not go beyond hail, and unless you hear me call for help all hands are to remain inside the barricade regardless of any token of battle. The others need not know I have gone."

Before I could make reply he was creeping through the brush, at the point where he went out the night before to attack the skulking Indian who had fired upon us, and I stood staring out into the darkness literally stupefied with fear. It seemed like a piece of foolhardiness to make an attempt at spying upon the foe when the shimmer of the snow even in the darkness would reveal the outlines of a moving form; and if it should be possible for him to make his way among the Indians undetected, what good could come of such a venture?

I pulled myself together, however, within a very few seconds after his departure, for now the responsibility of command was upon me; but the belief that we would never see the old man again gave me such a heaviness of heart that all bodily suffering was forgotten for the moment.

The report of a gun from the westward, ap-

parently at right angles with the course Master Stewart had taken, was an absolute relief, since it forced me to action when by remaining idle I might give way to useless grief.

"Did any one see the flash?" I asked in a low tone, after waiting a few seconds for some of my comrades to fire.

"Whoever sent that shot was a long distance away, for the bullet didn't come into camp," Colin replied.

"Keep your eyes open; if we could wing one of the villains just as they are getting to work it would do more good than at any other time," I added, believing it was my duty, in the absence of our leader, to encourage the lads even though they may have been stouter-hearted than I, through ignorance that the old hunter had left us.

Then came a long time of most profound silence, save for the stamping of the ponies as they fought off the cold, and I wondered why it was that the Indians had not discovered Master Stewart.

Perhaps half an hour had passed before we heard anything betokening an enemy, when, far away in the distance, sounded the report

of a gun. Then I believed it was possible to read the whole story.

The Missouris were returning to their village, having decided that we were too strongly intrenched to admit of their doing us any injury. The old hunter was in the rear, and had sent a bullet to quicken their heels. Between the first and second reports time enough had elapsed to permit of his reloading, and in my mind I could see him dodging from tree to tree behind the sneaking villains, watching for an opportunity to lessen their number.

"What's the meaning of all that, Master Stewart?" Colin asked sharply, and I replied.

"It's a case of speaking louder if you want to question him, for he went away nearly an hour ago. I believe the old man fired both shots, and that the Missouris have given over trying to take Bob and me back to the village."

The little lad from New York burst into a cheer, which was quickly smothered by Colin, who said sharply:

"Hold your peace, Bob. It isn't wise to crow before you're out of the woods. Louis is only guessing as to what may be afoot, and

it's possible that the villains are creeping up at this very moment, counting on taking us in the rear."

We were more vigilant than before, if that could be, for Colin had said what we knew might be only too true, and during the next hour every fellow strained his eyes to pierce the gloom lest the fight be suddenly resumed from a different quarter.

It was necessary to move about constantly, otherwise all hands might have been frozen, for it seemed as if the cold increased each moment, and more than once did I bathe my face with snow lest it should be frostbitten.

I counted that it was midnight when suddenly we were startled by the voice of Master Stewart as he cried from a distance to the northward :

"Light your fire, lads. Our troubles are over for this night at least, an' I reckon you're needin' a bit of heat."

"Needing it!" Bob cried cheerily. "We're so nearly stiff already that a few hours more or less of freezing don't make any difference."

Batiste set about striking a spark on our small store of tinder; but his hands were so

benumbed that Master Stewart was with us again before we saw the tiniest flame, and then, while we broke off the tips of dry branches to coax a speedy fire, the old hunter told what he had seen.

"When the first shot of the night sounded from a distance, I got the idee that they'd made up their minds to toddle back where it would be possible to keep warm. Most likely the snake who came with the flag of truce had given word that we were in strong quarters which couldn't be carried in any ordinary Injun fashion, an' sich news disheartened them as were weak-kneed. It wasn't takin' chances to get out, pervidin' I'd figgered the thing right, an' when I come up with 'em they'd jest started on the home trail. After the whole crowd was well under way I pinked one of the hindermost, an' that was enough to set the gang into a run. One more shot finished the business, an' they're making good time, believin' we're close behind 'em."

"We heard both shots," Colin said as he rubbed his stiffened fingers in front of the rapidly increasing blaze. "Why did you stay so long after firing the last time?"

“To make certain there wasn’t any chance of their pluckin’ up courage enough to make a stand. They’re off for sure, an’ we can count on not havin’ any more trouble with the Mis-souris this side of Chouteau’s Post.”

We were too nearly benumbed to give evidence of our joy and relief by cheering; but we danced around the fire, clapping each other on the back, kicking up our heels, and in such other childish ways displaying delight, as well we might, for we had come out of a mighty tight fix with marvelous good fortune.

We literally reveled in the warmth when the fire was burning brightly, and feasted on frozen antelope steaks, not because we were hungry, but in order to celebrate our deliverance, with never more than a passing heed to the fact that as yet the greater portion of the danger lay before us. There yet remained all that long, weary distance through the trackless forest before we could reach Chouteau’s Post, and even after traversing the necessary number of miles, it was not positive we should find the place we desired to gain, because of some mistake on our part as to the course.

There were yet no signs of the new day

when the old hunter awakened us with the command to make ready for the journey, and we struck the trail before it was sufficiently light to see our way clearly.

Before noon had come it was possible to travel with reasonable rapidity, for we had arrived at a broad plain where was no vestige of timber to be seen, and the snow lay so shallow and solidly frozen that the ponies could scamper over the surface at a brisk trot, therefore all of us were able to ride twenty miles or more before we were come to the wooded country again.

During the next three days we continued the journey without interruption; but only once more did we come to the open prairie where it was possible to travel rapidly.

On the evening of the third day, when we believed the village of the Missouris was at least an hundred and fifty miles behind us, we camped in a thicket of cottonwood where the foliage was so dense that it did not seem necessary to put up anything in the way of shelter, and lay down to sleep, congratulating ourselves that a full third of the long march had been accomplished without very great

hardship. We had had sufficient to eat, and, after the retreat of the Missouris, were not forced to get along without fire during the hours of darkness.

As a matter of course we suffered from the excessive cold ; but that was to be expected, and we looked upon it as one of the incidents of the journey rather than a misery.

At this last camp there was no water save that which could be had by melting snow ; but we hoped before another day had passed to strike one of the small streams leading to the Missouri, along the banks of which we could make our way with the assurance of not suffering from thirst while we had sufficient strength to break the ice.

At no time since leaving the snug hut on the bend of the stream near the village of the Missouris, had we been so light-hearted as at this camp. Even Master Stewart cracked jokes, and Bob Drexel was fairly bubbling over with mirth ; we laid plans for the future of the new company, and tried to decide where we should go on a trading expedition after arriving at Chouteau's Post.

When the desire for sleep pressed heavily

on a fellow's eyelids, he wrapped his blankets around him and laid down before the fire, wearied in body but well content in mind.

It seemed as if my eyes had but just closed in slumber when I was aroused by Master Stewart's cry :

"Turn out, lads, an' move lively, else you may find yourselves under a thicker blanket than will be comfortable !"

"Have the Indians come?" Bob asked sleepily as he leaped to his feet, and the old hunter replied gravely :

"There are no redskins abroad this night, lad, an' I'm not certain but that I would rather face a gang of them than what seems to be upon us now."

By this time I was sufficiently awake to understand the situation. The wind was howling mournfully through the trees, sweeping beneath the branches wreaths of fleecy snow, and I did not need be told that one of the greatest dangers which can beset a trader was close at hand.

A snow-storm in the wilderness may bring with it to those who are without proper shelter, a train of miseries which is ended only by

death ; there was not one among us, save it might be Bob, who had not heard of some hunter or party of hunters, who, having been overtaken by such a storm, had been so hemmed in that escape was impossible, and from the indications which were apparent to us in the thicket, I believed we were threatened by a greater danger than when the Missouris were in pursuit.

“What is to be done ?” I asked of Master Stewart, and he replied curtly :

“Get to work puttin’ up a shelter first, an’ then let all hands set about choppin’ wood. We can well afford to spend this night in labor, since there is little chance of being able to continue the journey to-morrow.”

A dozen or more trees were felled in such a manner that they would fall across a clump of four or five which had been left standing, and thus we had the foundation for a rude camp sufficiently large to shelter both men and beasts, in case it became necessary to bring the animals inside.

Then Batiste and Adolph set about chopping wood for fuel, while the remainder of the company cut branches and piled them upon

the structure sufficiently deep to prevent the snow from making its way through while the weather remained cold.

Day was come before we were done with this portion of our work, and the storm had increased in fury until it was literally a tempest, which forced the whirling, fleecy particles through the branches of the trees as if there had been nothing to impede their fall.

During this short time the old snow was covered a full four inches, giving token of what might be expected within another twelve hours, and Master Stewart said to me in a low tone, as he paused for a moment in the work of cutting fuel, for now all of us were engaged in that occupation :

“ We are like to be here a long time, lad, an’ we’ll pray that the weather grows colder instead of warmer.”

I, who had seen snow piled up inside the walls of Fort William until it was impossible for us to pass from one building to the other until after much shoveling and tunneling, knew what he meant, and straightway my mind went out to the store of provisions, as

I wondered how many days it would provide us with sustenance.

We were poorly prepared for what might come ; but yet made all the provision possible under the circumstances, and whatsoever of suffering or of danger was in store for us could not be further guarded against.

"How about the meat?" Colin asked when Master Stewart began chopping at some of the frozen stores, and the old man replied, after making careful examination :

"We have seven or eight days' supply, providin' no one eats more than he absolutely needs."

"And how long may we be kept here by this storm?" Bob asked.

"There is no reason why you lads should not face the truth," Master Stewart said gravely. "I have known one of these 'ere northeast tempests to hold on three days or more, after which neither man nor beast could make his way save on snow-shoes, an' with great labor, until the surface was frozen solid. If the sun comes out clear enough to dampen the top of the snow after the storm clears away, an' then we get a spell of cold weather,

there's a chance of traveling over the surface as we have done. It may be we are not regularly snowed in; but it looks much to me as if such was the case, an' it will do no harm to prepare ourselves for it."

"How can we do more than we have already done?" Colin asked impatiently.

"We have come to an end of our rope, except that it stands us in hand to find feed for the ponies, because we may yet need them for meat."

"Do people ever really eat their horses?" Bob Drexel asked of me in a whisper, and I could not refrain from laughing, for it seemed odd that any one should be so ignorant.

"I have eaten pony meat many a time, even at the fort, where you would hardly think the store of provisions would run low, and you will find, if we come to where such extravagance is necessary, that it goes ahead of buffalo flesh."

The only way we could feed the ponies was by chopping away the ice and snow nearabout the camp where they might come at the grass or moss beneath, and this we did; but the heavy downfall soon blotted out all traces of

our labor, though the beasts filled their stomachs twice before nightfall. When we lay down to sleep, having agreed that each should stand guard an hour in turn during the night in order to keep the fire burning, the tempest was still raging with unabated fury.

I went on duty about midnight, and it was a disagreeable hour which I spent on guard, allowing my thoughts to wander to this or that possible danger, until I had almost persuaded myself that here we would be forced to stay until the last pony had been eaten, and one by one we starved to death.

It was Master Stewart who followed after my time of duty was come to an end, and when I gave words to that which was in my mind, he said in what he counted should be a cheery tone :

“Don’t look ahead for trouble, lad. There’s no tellin’ how soon this storm will come to an end, and if the sun clears it away this mornin’ you will have fretted about nothin’.”

“There isn’t much chance that it is near the end,” I replied gloomily, and then, not minded for further conversation on that subject, laid down by Colin’s side, falling asleep even while

I believed it would be impossible to close my eyes in slumber.

During three days and nights the storm continued without intermission, and then I believed of a verity the snow was not less than four feet deep anywhere outside the line of our camp.

Master Stewart apportioned the meat, giving to each one only so much as was absolutely needed, and we spent our time after the storm had ceased in cutting fuel and gathering twigs for the ponies until the eighth day came, when it was necessary to butcher one of the little beasts.

By this time Bob was too hungry to shrink from eating horse-flesh, and during one day at least we feasted.

Then again short allowance until the second animal was selected, and so the time of imprisonment passed, little Bob Drexel being the only one of the party who always had a cheery word and a smile regardless of hunger, thirst or despair.

Two and thirty days were we confined behind a wall of snow like antelopes in a pound of their own making, and then but three half-

starved ponies remained of our beasts of burden.

The thaw for which all had been praying came on the twenty-sixth day, lasting eight and forty hours, after which the temperature fell until the greatest caution was necessary in order to prevent one's face from freezing.

Each morning Master Stewart went out to learn if we might safely continue the long interrupted journey, and finally the verdict for which we waited so impatiently was given.

"I reckon we can try it now, lads, but it's a case of every one takin' hold to help haul the sleds, for the ponies can do little more than get themselves along."

When we set out next day, as soon as the sun had risen, Colin, Batiste and I were each harnessed by the side of a pony to help draw the load. Master Stewart and Adolph were yoked to the fourth sled, while Bob was at liberty to aid one or the other as occasion might require, and in this manner, with no more of meat than was sufficient to provide us with scanty allowance for eight and forty hours, we set off through the wilderness on what seemed like a most hopeless task.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MANDAN VILLAGE

WE had no reason to believe that we would meet any human beings until arriving at Chouteau's Post, and knew full well that it would be impossible to find game while the snow covered the ground so deeply, therefore, with no more than provisions sufficient to satisfy our most pressing wants during eight and forty hours, it surely seemed as if we were come nearly to the length of our rope. It is true that we still had three ponies in reserve; but they were so nearly starved themselves that we could not hope to get very much meat from their bones, and once they had been slaughtered our advance would be slow indeed, unless, as might soon become necessary, we abandoned the goods.

To leave behind us all the pelts which had been taken, and the articles for barter that were charged against us on the books of the

St. Louis traders, was the same as dooming the new company to death before it had really been born, and I knew beyond a peradventure that my comrades would come very near the final end rather than give up all hope of becoming a power among the fur traders.

I believe we all had much the same thoughts when we pulled out from the camp in which we had been imprisoned so long, and set our faces toward that point of the compass where we believed would be found the Missouri River.

As a matter of course our teams, made up of a man and a pony working in the same harness, could advance only at a slow pace, even though the surface of the snow was frozen so hard that, save for slipping now and then, the footing could not have been better, and our utmost speed did not exceed three miles an hour.

As Master Stewart and I figured it, we were not less than two hundred miles from Chouteau's Post, which meant at least a ten-days' journey if everything worked smoothly and we found sufficient of game to save us the necessity of converting the ponies into pro-

visions, therefore it can be seen that the outlook was by no means promising.

The first day's march came to an end a few moments before sunset, when we halted in a thicket of willows where the ponies could find plenty of food, such as it was, and even Master Stewart was so nearly exhausted that he made no proposition toward building a camp.

A big fire, whereon we steeped tea and stewed a full third of the remaining pony meat, was the only preparation made for the night, and, rolled in our blankets, we dug out beds for ourselves in the snowdrifts, where I dare venture to say every member of the party slept as only weary people can.

On the road again at daylight, toiling side by side with the skeleton-like ponies, or tugging at the sled which was propelled by man-power only, with the snow-covered expanse of country before us as it stretched away into seemingly endless distance, and the second day of the last portion of the journey was begun.

Another halt in a thicket, this time on the bank of a small water-course where the ponies could get at the dried grass of the previous

season by literally burrowing in the snow, and the stewing of our last shreds of meat, marked the end of the second day's tramp.

When we laid down to sleep that night it was with the knowledge that on the morrow we must set off with empty stomachs, save for as much hot tea as we cared to drink, and the prospect was not such as gave us courage, although we slept as soundly as if at Chouteau's Post, which now seemed even further away than on the day we fled from the village of the Missouris.

Bob Drexel was the only member of the party who could laugh when we gathered around the fire next morning to drink tea, and I said to myself then that whatever might be his shortcomings in the future, I would forgive everything because of the cheer which came to us with his merry ways.

During the forenoon we toiled on as do those who have lost all hope, our eyes bent on the frozen surface that we might not gaze over the seemingly endless plains, or on thickets wherein we knew only too well that no game would be found, and I wondered if it would not be better to fast another day in

order that we might have the services of the pony which must soon be slaughtered, just so many hours longer.

I had abandoned all hope that we might reach Chouteau's Post; it seemed to me that the span of our lives could be determined by the amount of flesh to be found on the frames of the nearly starved ponies, and when that had been eaten it was only a question of staggering on blindly until death ended all.

Greedily I eyed the little steeds who moved feebly along by the side of their human helpers, asking myself if it would not be better to abandon the goods and thus give up all hope of ever being factors in the fur-gathering world, with the chance that we could push on more rapidly, when a dull cry from Batiste caused me to look up suddenly.

Then it was that I rubbed my eyes mechanically, fancying for the moment that I was beholding one of those pictures in the sky which learned men call mirages, for there before us, no more than two miles distant, could be seen the lodges of an Indian village.

"What is it?" I cried, and Master Stewart

replied by asking in a voice tremulous with excitement :

“ What does it look like, lad ? ”

“ A village of lodges, and yet it can't be, for surely there are no Indians hereabout, if we have come on a true course ! ”

“ An', God be thanked, we've wandered from the river, else would we have nothin' before us save the snow, which has been nigh to makin' me lose my mind. Yonder is a village, lads, an' there, because of what we've got with us, will it be possible to buy that which we need so sorely ! ”

By this time the Indians were swarming out to meet us, one of the men greeting Master Stewart as if he were an old friend, whereupon I asked irritably, for the sudden change from despair to hope had told upon my nerves :

“ Who are these people ? ”

“ Mandans, my boy, an' I'll answer for it that we can have the half of all they've got ; but hold your peace as to our bein' so hard pressed, for I'm countin' on makin' 'em think we've come for the sole purpose of tradin'. We'll have food in plenty, an', unless I'm way off in my reckonin', be able to swap all our

goods for pelts. The new company is still alive, my jolly lads!"

"I knew it had to come all right after a while," Bob Drexel cried cheerily, but without any great show of delight. "We couldn't keep on eating pony all the time, you know, 'cause we didn't have enough of 'em left to go around much longer."

We would have given way to most extravagant demonstrations of joy because of our happy deliverance, but for Master Stewart, who cautioned us again and again to refrain from showing that which might give evidence of our sore distress.

"Indians are much like white men in one respect," he said gravely. "If they believe you're strong an' able to depend upon yourselves, you can count on their friendship; but let it once appear that you're at their mercy, dependent upon them even for food, an' they'll ride over you rough-shod."

Therefore it was that we marched into the village with our heads held high, and giving no evidence that our stomachs were empty.

One of the best lodges was immediately placed at our disposal, a swarm of women and

children being unceremoniously turned out to make way for us, and the half-starved ponies were led to the corral.

The first act of an Indian in welcoming a guest, is to make ready a feast as soon as possible, regardless of whether it be early morning or late at night, and we had hardly more than entered the lodge when a crier was sent around the village summoning the braves to an entertainment which was to be provided immediately by the chief, *Lame Antelope*.

"They can't get dinner any too soon to suit me," Bob said after the words of the crier had been translated by Master Stewart. "I'm feeling mighty empty in the stomach; but I want you fellows to look out, for if they try to shove off any stewed dog on me I'm going to stay hungry quite a spell longer."

"I saw the carcass of a bear as we came in, an' it's safe to say that they won't squander dog on us when there is another kind of meat in camp," the old hunter replied with a laugh. "If you stay in the fur-tradin' business, lad, you must make up your mind to eat dog once in a while, for it is the greatest delicacy these redskins can offer, an' you'd make enemies of

'em past mendin' if you turned up your nose at such a dish."

"You fellows can tend to that part of the business, and I'll do the starving," Bob said as he laid down on a pile of buffalo robes with a sigh of content. "Ain't this great? It don't seem as if we'd ever slept in the snow and been frozen to our blankets, does it?"

"I can still remember it quite plainly," Colin replied laughingly, "and shan't get the idea out of my head till after we've had our full share of the bear Master Stewart saw."

We were a jolly party, indeed, disposed to find something of pleasure or mirth in everything around us, now that our troubles had fled for the time being, and until the ceremonious invitation was received summoning us to Lame Antelope's lodge, we made merry, as men may who have been rescued from a lingering death.

We overhauled the packages in order to get suitable presents, for it would have been a serious breach of Indian politeness had we failed to give the leading men of the village goods equal in value to the cost of the entertainment provided for us.

"Are you still of the mind that we can do any trading here?" I asked as the old man set aside this article or that, estimating carefully the cost lest we show ourselves too generous.

"Of course I am, lad, an' it'll be hard lines if we don't swap all this stuff for ten times its worth in pelts."

The Mandans are honest, as Indians go, therefore we had no hesitation in leaving all our belongings in the lodge, with no precautions as to safe keeping than that of fastening down the door of skin.

It was nearly time for the sun to set when we took our leave of the old chief, who had rendered us a greater service than he could fancy, and we were no sooner alone in the lodge than a second invitation was brought for a feast to be given by Wild Duck, the Indian who had greeted Master Stewart as an old friend.

"After coming near to death by starvation, we are like to be killed by too much food," Bob said with a comical show of dismay. "If I'd known we'd be expected to eat all the time, Lame Antelope would have more stew in his lodge than he has now."

"You've shown yourself a hero when we had no provisions, Bob, and now you must be a cheerful martyr so long as the bear meat holds out for the stewing," Colin cried with a laugh, and once more Master Stewart overhauled our stores to find presents for this second host and his friends.

"If that bear was very big, you'll give away all our goods before we've had a chance to do any trading," Bob said ruefully, and he had hardly more than spoken when two squaws, whom we had seen at Lame Antelope's lodge, came in with a package of beaver pelts.

Throwing the skins on the ground in front of Master Stewart, the women went away without speaking, and Bob's eyes were opened wide in surprise.

"That's what we get for the first lot of goods," the old hunter said in a tone of satisfaction as he examined the pelts, finding them in prime condition. "At this rate I reckon we can keep on eatin' an' givin' away trinkets quite a spell."

At this second entertainment the Indians danced before beginning the feast, and after the pipe had been passed from mouth to

mouth four or five times. We three lads, no longer hungry, were heavy with sleep, and Master Stewart, seeing our condition, whispered to me :

“ There’s no good reason why you shouldn’t go back to the lodge, if it so pleases you. Baptiste, Adolph an’ I will be enough to uphold the dignity of the new company, an’ Wild Duck won’t be offended if you sneak off.”

Bob and Colin were quite as eager as I to lie down, and as soon as might be after the old hunter explained that it was not absolutely necessary for us to remain, the three of us quietly left the scene of the festivities, going directly to our own lodge.

Arriving there it seemed as if the little chap from New York had suddenly lost all desire for slumber, for, after covering himself snugly on the bed of furs, he began speculating as to what we might be able to do in case the Mandans had plenty of furs for barter.

It stands to reason that Colin and I were interested in such a subject, and it was near to midnight before our eyes were closed in slumber. The last sounds I heard were of revelry from Wild Duck’s lodge, and while

passing over into dreamland I wondered how much longer Master Stewart and the voyageurs would be able to hold their own at the feast.

Not until break of day did I see the old hunter, and then he was broiling bear-steaks over a fire which had been built in the centre of the lodge.

"You must have quite an appetite if, after eating all night, you need food so early," I said with a laugh, absolutely reveling in the knowledge that there was no longer any lack of meat among us.

"These 'ere steaks are for three lads who show the white feather very soon when it comes to hobnobbin' with our red brothers. I'm allowin' that you'll turn out right early to make ready for the work of the day."

"What have you on hand?" I asked with mild curiosity as I arose lazily to a sitting posture.

"This mornin' the new company really begins business. I agreed last night with Wild Duck an' his friends that we'd open up for trade, an' it stands us in hand to be ready, else they may find out that we're green at the work."

He could have said nothing that would have aroused me more quickly, and in a twinkling I was shaking Colin and Bob roughly that I might the sooner impart to them the good news.

The little lad from New York could hardly contain himself for joy because the time had come when he might in good truth call himself a fur-trader, and Colin was not far behind him in cutting antics. Both sobered down into rational boys, however, before the steaks were ready for eating, and when breakfast had been hurriedly despatched we set about getting our goods out where they could be seen to the best advantage.

It was not possible to take the same precautions against treachery that were observed at Chouteau's Post, nor were they needed. Master Stewart was among old friends, and he was willing to guarantee that there would be no attempt made to take advantage of us, other than in the regular way of bargaining.

We had not made ready for business any too soon. Our goods were hardly more than spread out when Wild Duck appeared, accom-

panied by two squaws who literally staggered under their burdens of pelts.

There was little we lads could do once the bargaining was begun. The old hunter showed that he was a good match for the Mandans in driving a sharp trade, and our share of the work consisted in handling the different articles as they were called for, or in stowing away the pelts which had been purchased.

Batiste and Adolph spent their time lounging around the village, eating with every one who offered them food, and the wonder of it all was that they did not fill themselves full to bursting.

Toward noon, when our lodge was piled high with pelts and the stock in trade had diminished to less than one full package, we three lads went out to look after the ponies, for now they had become very valuable in our eyes. There was no longer any question but we would soon have all the fur that could be paid for, and we greedily laid plans for a journey to Chouteau's Post to dispose of the skins and get a new supply of goods in order to make two "turns" before spring came.

"It'll be a hard job to tramp from here to the river; the Indians call it a four-days' journey, and loaded as we shall be, it'll take us twice as long," Colin said thoughtfully, and Bob replied quickly:

"We can't get it any worse than while coming from the village of the Missouris, and what does cold or hunger count for if thereby we can put ourselves on a footing with the other fur-traders?"

"That's the way to talk, lad!" I cried approvingly. "Now is our time, and we'd be silly to let it slip. It means almost another year's work, if we can get a second load of goods in here before warm weather, for we're taking the business out of Manuel Lisa's hands."

When we lads returned to the lodge Master Stewart had come to an end of his trading for that day. Another feast was about to be given in our honor, and it would have been the height of ill-breeding had we attempted to keep open shop while it was possible for all in the village to gorge themselves.

"Another six hours an' we'll have made a success of our first venture," the old man said

gleefully as he packed together all that remained of the trinkets. "For a company which was nigh to bein' wiped out at the torture post, within a hair's breadth of bein' shot down by the Missouris, starved up to an inch of death, an' mostly frozen, we haven't done very bad. It does really seem as if fortune was bent on doin' us a good turn; if we'd struck a straight course for Chouteau's Post, we'd died on the way, an' there's no guess-work about that. We make a mistake, an' come out at about the only place within two hundred miles where we could do any business. It looks considerably like luck, seein's how it wasn't our wits that brought us through."

"Are we likely to make much money out of the venture?" Bob asked anxiously.

"It seems that way to me, lad. With what we caught, I'm allowin' we've got fifteen hundred dollars' worth of pelts—that is, when they're on the coast. If we can get a new stock of goods an' do as well with it before spring, this 'ere company will start out next year with the best of 'em, barrin' the fact that we've then got our own posts to build."

"Can we do it?"

"Why not?" and the old man looked up in surprise. "It's only a case of hirin' four or five men, an' while the other traders are loafin' 'round St. Louis, Mackinaw or Montreal, we can be buildin' stockades. The new company is well under way, lads, an' you may take my word for it that if nothin' very serious happens, Manuel Lisa will be jealous of us within the next eight months, which is the same as sayin' we'll have what capital is needed to work with."

It was a bright picture he painted, and the realization of it depended only on our being able to make the journey to Chouteau's Post and return, while it was yet winter. I knew full well that all the companies, with the exception of the Hudson's Bay and the Astor, had begun with much less money than we would have if a second stock of goods could be disposed of before the Indians were ready to go to this post or that to do their trading. The only drawback which I could see was that we had no facilities for getting our pelts into the best market; but all that could be remedied in time.

"We'll send Bob to London or New York to attend to that end of the business," I cried, thus counting my chickens before they were hatched. "He is well up in city ways, and can play the swell in great shape."

"He hasn't made a bad fist at wilderness ways," Master Stewart interrupted. "If you can show me a lad who stands up better under danger an' misery, I'll be glad to see him," and Colin added :

"He has beaten us at our own game, and it was a lucky day for the new company when Master Hunt threw him over at Mackinaw."

The little lad's cheeks flushed with pleasure at this praise, and he slipped his hand shyly in mine as he replied, like the true-hearted chap that he was :

"It's enough for me if I've made you fellows glad because you picked me up after Master Hunt decided I wasn't any good for him. Of course I want to make some money if it's possible ; but I shan't feel so terribly bad if that can't be, for I've come to know you."

"You own a quarter of all we've got from this out, and don't forget it, you little bantam,"

Master Stewart said emphatically, and then, the goods and furs having been piled away in something approaching order, we all went out to partake of the feast, which promised to be the last, unless that bear had been particularly large.

In three days after the trading was begun we did not have even a gaudy handkerchief left of all the store of goods with which Manuel Lisa had entrusted us, while our pelts made up eight packages, the meanest of which was worth more than all we had brought into the wilderness.

A good twelve hours were spent in getting the fur into shape for transportation, and then was come the time when we asked each of the other whether we should set out on the morrow, or remain idle another four and twenty hours.

In the course of the trading Master Stewart had not only exchanged our ponies for three which were in better condition, but had bought three more, therefore we might count on making the journey to Chouteau's Post in reasonably good time, unless the weather should be against us.

Then came the question of provisions, and the buying of these required more of time and patience than the purchase of pelts to the possible value of two thousand dollars.

We had no more goods to barter, and I wondered how Master Stewart would get over the difficulty, unless he sold back some of the pelts at ridiculously low prices, until I saw him bargaining with *Lame Antelope* for our saddles and bridles.

Since an Indian always rides bare-back it seemed to me that the old man was only wasting his time; but, much to my surprise, a trade was made, and, in exchange for what could be of no real service to the redskins, we got of dried buffalo meat sufficient to provide us with food for at least ten days.

It goes without saying that we were taking dangerous risks to set off with no more in the way of provisions; but it would have been impossible to buy another pound, and we were willing to brave all the chances in order to get in another supply of goods while the country was yet held frost-bound.

It was necessary to build one more sled in order to transport all the goods, and, as a

matter of course, Master Stewart attended to this portion of the work, making a very creditable job when one considers that he had no tools save an axe and a knife with which to work.

With six ponies and only five sleds, it will be seen that one of the beasts would not be called upon to draw a burden ; but we made a pack of the camp equipage for his back, and no small load did it form.

At last came the time when we might leave the village, and Lamé Antelope insisted that we promise solemnly to return as soon as might be, agreeing on his part that we should find plenty of pelts to be exchanged for goods, even though his young men might not be successful in their trapping, because he would send to the nearest village, informing the people there that the traders had come.

It was a bright morning when we set off on the march to Chouteau's Post, and a party of Mandans insisted on following us two miles or more before they were ready to say good-bye. Then once more we turned our faces toward where we believed the river lay, with the seemingly endless waste of snow before us ;

but our hearts were light, and, as Bob said, we were in condition to stand a good deal of starving before going under entirely.

CHAPTER XX

THE NEW COMPANY

It was to me as if I traveled on air during the first day of the journey ; the promises of the future were so bright and apparently so near fulfilment that my head was in the clouds. The air was so cold that a fellow's breath froze to his lips ; but to me it seemed charming weather, because it was to the advantage of the new company that the country remain in the bonds of frost until we could go to Chouteau's Post and return.

If the way became difficult, I rejoiced, saying to myself that because of such fact other traders were less likely to follow in our footsteps, and when my companions spoke of the distance to be traversed, I reminded them that the Indians would not be inclined to go so often to bargain with M'sieur Chouteau. In fact, there was no difficulty or discomfort which I could not twist in some way to the gain of our company.

Now we were so near the accomplishment of our first purpose, and were assured that if we reached the post in safety with all our belongings we had every right to consider ourselves full-fledged traders, many a hot discussion was held while toiling over the icy crust of snow, as to where we would locate our first stockade, for we were fully decided to have wilderness quarters of our own before another winter came.

With all these rose-colored dreams of the future it is not surprising that to us the miles contained only half the usual number of feet, and the long, cold nights when we were forced to camp in the snow, without any shelter whatsoever, were as short, pleasant halts.

On the morning of the eighth day we were in prime condition; the work had told on the ponies, but they were good for twice as much labor as had yet been performed, and we knew the long journey must be near a close, although all of us believed we would be forced to tramp three or four days more.

Therefore it was that when, near about noon, Master Stewart raised a cry of joy and triumph, we craned our necks to see some

strange sight, with never a thought we had come within view of the river, and scrutinized closely that winding depression in the field of white before allowing ourselves to realize that the Missouri lay plain before us.

Then it was as if every member of the new company believed it his duty to make all the noise possible, and, coming to a halt, we yelled ourselves hoarse before taking another forward step.

The dangers had been passed ; on the line of the river where were no trees to impede our progress, the advance could be made as rapidly as it was possible for the ponies to travel, and, to our minds at least, we were much the same as already at Chouteau's Post.

The only question was as to whether we had arrived above or below the stockade, and this Master Stewart could not determine with any degree of certainty. He had never before come out of the wilderness while the earth was covered with its winter mantle of white, and, therefore, was unable to distinguish any landmarks.

We held a long, earnest discussion as to whether our way led up or down stream, but

without being able to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion until Colin suggested :

"Since we can't seem to decide the matter ourselves, suppose we drive the ponies on the river in a straight line from the bank, and let them go in whatsoever direction they will."

It was a poor way in which to settle an important matter, but yet better than discussing it without apparent possibility of arriving at a satisfactory conclusion, and we urged the beasts forward.

Without seemingly to hesitate, they turned down stream, and Master Stewart muttered as he followed them :

"I must see the stockade before believin' that we have been bearin' so far to the westward."

Two hours later, having during this time traveled at our best pace, Bob Drexel, who was in advance, began to shout joyously, and then suddenly held his peace as he looked around in surprise and perplexity.

Hurrying up we saw to our astonishment a winter camp, one evidently occupied by white men, and yet it was not the stockade we expected to see. There were no less than thirty

hunters and voyageurs moving here or there among the huts, and the truth did not dawn upon me until Colin cried :

“ It was the ponies who made a mistake ; we should have gone up-stream ! ”

“ Ay, lad, an’ I felt certain we hadn’t worked so far to the westward,” the old hunter said as he urged the leading pony forward.

“ Whose camp is that ? ” I asked, beginning to suspect the fact.

“ The Astor Company’s,” Colin replied, and added with a laugh, “ Bob has come to his own again, and I reckon he won’t feel like hanging back with us while his old comrades push on toward the Pacific Ocean.”

“ I’m satisfied to stay where I am,” the little lad said, loitering as if it was not to his mind to enter the encampment.

It was now too late in the day to warrant our turning about and trying to make Chouteau’s Post before dark, therefore we followed the old hunter, and received a hearty welcome from every one, for white visitors in the wilderness are too much of a rarity to permit of

their being treated other than in the most hospitable fashion.

We unharnessed the ponies, and surprised each of them with a quart of corn, in addition to turning them out where they could get plenty of dried grass, after which we were ready to explain why we had come.

Master Hunt was yet in St. Louis; but his clerk, John Reed, who appeared to be in command, ordered that a plentiful supply of fresh meat be set before us, and while we were partaking of it Master Stewart gave him a brief account of our adventures, after which the most glowing offers were made if we would join the American Company as hunters and trappers.

No one seemed to recognize Bob as a lad who had been cast adrift by that same party, and he, fearing lest, now he had served an apprenticeship in the wilderness, the leaders of the company insist that he remain with them, was very careful not to call attention to himself.

The clerk promised, in the name of Master Hunt, that we three lads and Master Stewart

should each be paid the sum of four hundred dollars every year, and our outfits furnished, if we would join the company for a term of five years, remaining during that time in the vicinity of the post on the Pacific, which he declared had already been built.

But for the good prospect before us of being able to start a company of our own, we might have closed with the offer, for it was most flattering; but by succeeding in our enterprise we would be able to earn very much more money, in addition to establishing ourselves in a permanent business where others could be hired for the more dangerous and arduous portion of the work.

Well was it for us that we had higher ambitions than that of spending our lives hunting and trapping, for had the clerk's proposition been accepted we would have been forced to endure the unspeakable sufferings which were the portion of this company before it succeeded in arriving at the Pacific coast, and afterward found that our contracts were of no value, since the American Company failed utterly of its purpose.

After the War of 1812 broke out the North-

west Company seized Astoria, as the post of the Americans was called, and I would possibly have had the privilege of returning to my duties as clerk, or of shifting for myself in a strange country.

However, we had no idea of abandoning our project, which was by this time almost a reality, and on the following morning we started on our way to Chouteau's Post, where we arrived early that same afternoon.

We had left Batiste and Adolph at the encampment, promising to bring them the amount due as wages as soon as we could dispose of our pelts.

To our great satisfaction Manuel Lisa was not at the stockade; he had returned to St. Louis before the ice formed, and we were at liberty to deal with M'sieur Chouteau, who was a more liberal and more honest man.

He was pleased to give us what Master Stewart declared was a fair price for our furs, and we found ourselves the owners of goods for barter and drafts on St. Louis, to the amount of twenty-one hundred dollars, after paying the wages of the voyageurs.

"One more journey like this last, lads, an'

we will have a capital large enough to put the new company on a solid basis, after which we can lie back an' let others do the hard work," Master Stewart said in a tone of satisfaction when we were alone in the evening following the sale of our pelts. "Nothin' but a blunder or foolhardiness can stop us now, an' it's time we made out articles of partnership."

Because this record of our wanderings in the wilderness might never come to an end if I were to make an attempt at setting down all we did until our company was recognized as a factor in the fur-trading world, I propose to bring the story, if such it can be called, to a close.

We made a second journey to the Mandan village, and came back laden with pelts while the ice yet remained firm in the waterways. As a matter of course it was hardly what might be called a pleasure excursion, but we were not called upon to endure any more of suffering and hardships than had already been our portion. This last venture was not concluded until we arrived at St. Louis, for we decided to transport our own goods rather than

pay others for so doing, and once at that settlement we paid our debt, with interest, to Simon Southard.

We made a further profit of twenty-nine hundred dollars, thus giving us a capital of five thousand dollars, or considerably more than was invested at the beginning by any other company save the Hudson's Bay.

That very summer we built a stockade fifty miles higher up the river than Chouteau's Post, and gave to it the name of "Bob's Fort," in honor of our partner, the little lad whose sunny disposition and unquestioned courage had aided us in so many times of peril and misery.

My comrades decided that I should take charge of the post, acting the part of trader, and early in the winter Master Stewart and Colin, taking with them a full half of all our goods, and fifteen men, struck straight across the wilderness until arriving near the village of the Missouris, where a second stockade, christened "The Refuge," was erected.

Our first season was a most prosperous one, so much so in fact that we decided the time had come when we might venture to deal in

the London market direct, and little Bob Drexel was sent across the ocean as resident agent of the "New Company."

More than once had we discussed the question of taking some really distinctive name; but Colin pleaded that it had been known to us while we were within the very shadow of death, and when our only capital was the credit extended by Manuel Lisa, as the New Company, therefore we should hold to that title. And so we did in a legal manner, with Master Stewart as the president and I as treasurer.

As I sit here in Bob's Fort this day, bringing to a close the writing of our story, which has served to pass most agreeably many an hour that would have been most tedious since the snows of winter shut us in, the New Company is well and most favorably known in this country as well as England, and I dare venture to say that if we were so inclined, the five members of the company could retire from business with what might be called large fortunes.

That we still continue to toil so far from

others of our kind is due, I believe, to the fascination which the wilderness has for every man who lives within it any considerable length of time. A peaceful place it is, save when the scoundrelly redskins take it into their ugly heads to dig up the hatchet. A restful place, except when business interests demand that one make long journeys during the winter, and, take it all in all, the only portion of this wide world in which I could be content to dwell.

Bob often writes that his partners might do better than toil, and freeze, and roast amid the savages when they can well afford to live in any city which strikes their fancy, and when I answered the last letter in which he made a similar remark, it was in these words :

“ We have about decided to push our posts as far as the Pacific Ocean. Already Colin has visited the Nor’westers with a proposition to buy all their right and title to the settlement started by the Astor party, and it is more than probable the offer will be accepted. If the deal goes through, you had better come back and make the try with us ; it is bound

to be a hard task, but none worse than we have accomplished before, and it will do you solid good to have another taste of wilderness life—to live hard, lie hard, sleep hard, and eat dog.”

THE END

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